

EARLY SOCIAL FORMATIONS
AMAR FAROOQUI
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PREFACE

For the past several years I have been associated with teaching a course on 'Social Formations and Cultural Patterns of the Ancient and Medieval World' at the undergraduate level in the University of Delhi. The course is meant to acquaint students with the historical evolution of human societies, from the origins of humankind to the rise of feudalism in Europe. Even though this is only supposed to be a survey course, it has a wide range of themes. The literature dealing with these themes is vast and my students and I have often felt the need for a concise book which would provide the basic information on the topics in the course. The present book is intended to be a general introduction to the subject. The main focus of the book is on early social formations of West Asia, Egypt, Greece and Rome. I have broadly kept in mind the structure of the University of Delhi course (including the proposed changes in the draft of the revised course), but have included some material which, it is hoped, will be found useful by others as well. My work is based entirely on secondary sources and lays no claim to original research.

I should like to thank Smita Sahgal, without whose support and encouragement this book would never have been written. I must acknowledge my debt to P. S. Dwivedi who first initiated me into the discipline as my teacher in St Stephen's College. His guidance, when I subsequently began teaching the course on social formations, was a source of enrichment for me. I am grateful to Virginius Xaxa for providing me with information I needed.

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The interaction and lively discussions which I have had with my students at Hans Raj College over the years have shaped my understanding of the issues which are dealt with in this book.

Amar Farooqui

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Chapter One

HUMAN EVOLUTION

THE human species represents the most advanced stage of a long process of evolution which began with the formation of the Earth nearly 4600 million (4,600,000,000) years ago and the emergence of the earliest forms of animate matter about 3500 million years ago. This does not mean that the process of evolution has come to an end. There is continuous change in nature. But changes which result in the evolution of new species are usually spread over such a long time span—often millions or hundreds of thousands of years—that they are not easily apparent. As a matter of fact the human mind cannot easily comprehend the time span over which the evolutionary process in nature is spread. Humans are accustomed to dealing with time on a comparatively minute scale. There is another aspect of change which has to be taken into account. With the emergence of humans a qualitatively new situation has arisen. Human intervention itself has become a factor and biological/natural evolution is not the only option. Human intervention implies cultural adaptation and this has opened up several new possibilities. The evolutionary process is not confined to biological evolution alone.

I

It is relatively recently, during the latter half of the nineteenth century, that the theory that human beings are the product of an evolutionary process was first advanced. This

revolutionary theory was first developed by Charles Darwin (1809-1882). Darwin, an English scientist, completely transformed our way of looking at nature and ourselves. He accompanied a five-year long naturalist expedition to various parts of South America and the Pacific aboard the ship *HMS Beagle*. The expedition visited some very remote islands and provided Darwin with an opportunity to acquaint himself with numerous unfamiliar features of plant and animal life in those regions. During the course of his voyage Darwin accumulated a vast amount of information at first hand about varieties of plants and animals. The material collected by him on this expedition and his subsequent researches led to the publication of his pathbreaking work *The Origin of Species* in 1859. In this book Darwin outlined his theory of evolution.

Darwin's work was preceded by significant developments in natural sciences during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Considerable headway had been made, for instance, in the classification of plants and animals. An important contribution to this classification was made by the Swedish botanist Linnaeus (Carl von Linne, 1707-1778). Classification based on criteria which have been scientifically worked out requires grouping together of plants/animals which share certain characteristics, thereby introducing some order in the available data about the bewildering variety of living organisms. Systematic classification made it easier to perceive differences and similarities between various species.

By the end of the eighteenth century scientists were beginning to think in terms of nature having a *history*, i.e., that the natural world had not come into existence as a finished product at a given moment, but had evolved through a historical process. It had a history just as human societies have a history. The French scientist George de Buffon (1707-88) argued in his several volume work *Natural History* that the natural world had changed over a period of time. The contemporary natural world was different from what it was like in earlier ages.

Two related developments which assisted in providing a firm basis for the concept of evolution were the emergence of geology as a scientific discipline, and the study of fossils. Geology is essentially the scientific study of the origins, structure and composition of the Earth, especially its rocks. Fossils are imprints of animals or plants which lived long ago preserved in rocks. In the case of animals these are usually remains of the harder parts—e.g. bones, and shells—which have left a permanent mark on the rock while that rock is in the process of hardening. The hardened rock would then bear the shape of the given animal/plant part. Fossils provide us evidence about animals or plants which lived several hundreds of thousands or even millions of years ago. They are our main source of information about species which have become extinct—as for instance dinosaurs.

Fossils are basically rocks. Therefore they have to be studied with the assistance of geologists. The development of the science of rocks helped to interpret fossils. Geology was the means to establishing the antiquity of a fossil and the environment in which the fossilized organism had lived. Of course early geology could only indicate the possible sequence in which one fossil relative to another could have evolved, without providing actual dates. One could say that a fossil was earlier, later or contemporary when compared with another. But what was crucial at that stage was the suggestion of change having occurred in nature over a period of time. We will return to the question of fossils a little later.

All these developments in science prepared the ground for the work of Chevalier de Lamarck (1744-1829). Lamarck was a French scientist who was appointed botanist to the king of France a few years before the French Revolution, and was professor of zoology in Paris after the Revolution. In his writings, which included the seven-volume work *Natural History of Invertebrate Animals* published between 1815 and 1822, Lamarck made the central point that plant and animal species underwent change. They were not static, unchanging entities. The species were not fixed but could change from

one generation to the next. This was an important step towards explaining the enormous diversity of living organisms in terms of evolution. Fossil evidence confirmed that species had undergone changes, that some life forms had died out, while new ones had evolved and got diversified. Lamarck's understanding of these changes was, however, simplistic and scientifically incorrect. He suggested that changes occurred when a particular part of an animal was either put to more frequent use or was not regularly used. This might cause that part to become larger, and conversely disuse would result in smaller organs. If this assisted in better adaptation the change might be passed on to successive generations. This would give rise to species with different characteristics. Unfortunately this Lamarckian understanding has at times been confused with Darwin's extremely sophisticated theory of evolution.

The main thesis propounded by Darwin was that species have evolved due to minor variations in individual members of species. These variations may be inherited by the offspring. As a result of a long cumulative process (often over several hundred thousand or millions of years) the variation/s will end up in the emergence of new species. The success of these variations in better adaptation, or more efficient survival, determines whether the variations continue to be passed on. The principle of heredity makes it possible for the offspring to inherit the variations, which in turn are passed on to their offspring. If the variation *does not* result in death or less efficient adaptation, it might continue being passed on to successive generations. This implies natural selection. The fittest will be selected—survival of the fittest.

The continuous struggle to survive, i.e. to adapt more efficiently, is also to be seen in the context of competing demands of other living organisms on the resources of a given environment. In any case the environment itself is not a fixed one but also changes over a period of time, necessitating adjustment. An additional factor in coping with the environment and contributing to the intense

struggle for survival is the increase in population of a species which has adapted successfully in a given environment. Minor variations could equip an organism to compete better. By a cumulative process a new species (or several new species) might arise which survive in that environment in different ways. By surviving better would be meant not just being able to live but also reproduce successfully. There are two important points to be borne in mind. One is that from one generation to the next the variations are very small. If they were not minor the offspring with variations would just not survive. These changes take place over a very long time, involving several hundred thousand generations. Every generation will have its own branches and sub-branches and sub-sub-branches and so on. At every level there will be the possibility not only of old variations being carried forward but new variations being introduced. As successive generations branch out yet new variations might be introduced in varying combinations. All members of a given generation will therefore not have the same set (or combination) of variations. Thus the various branches will evolve differently. This brings us to the second point. Every variation must not be thought of as an improvement. There could be many variations which by themselves or when combined with earlier received variations might result in a dead-end. The mathematical possibilities for differentiation, when the astronomical number of generations multiplied by possible variations is taken into account, are literally mind-boggling. This accounts for the kind of diversity which we find among living organisms.

Not only did Darwin provide a plausible theory for understanding the dynamics of evolution, but also placed human beings within this process. It was this part of Darwin's theory that many people found difficult to accept. There was a lot of opposition to his views. Darwin pointed out that humans were as much a product of evolution as other living organisms. Human beings did not arrive readymade: they evolved from earlier and more primitive

life forms. He fully developed his argument about human evolution in his later work *Descent of Man* (1871). The argument outlined in this work has been generally confirmed by subsequent scientific research.

The further back we go in time the larger the number of species with which we share common ancestors. Starting with the common ancestor of apes, those of primates, of mammals, vertebrates, to those of multicellular organisms etc., till we eventually trace our steps back through several million years to single-cell organisms. We have so many common features because we have common ancestors. The point is that we are not just descended from apes, who only happen to be nearest to us in the evolutionary tree, but also from some of the most primitive life forms as well. As twentieth century advances in science have demonstrated we share with them a very essential feature—DNA. DNA, or genes, are the basis of life as we know it. These are "structures" which are distinguished from molecules of non-life forms of matter primarily by their ability to self-replicate (i.e. make 'copies' of themselves), and to transmit the instructions for further self-replication to their 'copies', thereby setting in motion a continuous process of reproduction and evolution.

DNA are long chains of small molecules. These small molecules (or nucleotides) are joined together forming a lengthy chain. This chain (located on chromosomes) contains the information, something like computer memory or a floppy disc, which determines the specific characteristics of a living organism. This information is the genetic 'code' of a species. The 'code' or the information contained in the DNA provides instructions which are used in the process of building up cells of animals and plants. Different kinds of cells in a living organism use information in the DNA that is relevant to the building of that type of cell. There will be different types of cells performing different functions, but each cell in a given organism will have the same 'code' or DNA. This DNA must be thought of as a vast storehouse of information which has been passed on to that organism in

the process of evolution. All the information might not even be used by that species. It has been pointed out that the DNA of even very primitive animals might contain more information than all the volumes of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* put together. It needs to be emphasized that the information contained in the DNA will be that which is conducive to survival of an organism. The transmission of the genetic code (containing all the accumulated information of the species) takes place during the course of reproduction. As we have already noted, the distinctive feature of DNA is that they are self-replicating. The ability to make copies of themselves and to pass on instructions for making further copies is what makes them different from other molecules. The ability to *reproduce* is what defines living organisms. Otherwise living as well as non-living forms of matter are just molecules. This special quality of DNA to make copies of itself and the instructions contained in those copies to make further copies is what sets in motion the process of evolution.

What has happened over nearly 3500 million years is that the copies have not always been exact. There have been very small errors at times. This has given rise to possibilities for change. All copies are not necessarily exactly identical. New types of organisms have therefore evolved. DNA has a remarkable capacity for making exact copies without any errors. The copies are normally free of errors and remain so for long periods of time during which several million error-free copies might be made. But reproduction is such a complex process that once in a while there could be a minor error—mutation. Just one small bit of information may be wrongly copied or transmitted. Since the data or information with which we are dealing is so large, there are as many possibilities as to what the actual error or mutation will be. Whether or not the mutation is retained will depend on the extent to which it enables the organism to survive. Through natural selection and a long cumulative process, mutations

which are retained and transmitted to successive generations

will result in the evolution of new species.

It is remarkable that nearly 150 years after the publication of *Origin of Species*, Darwin's theory remains the most satisfactory hypothesis that we have for understanding evolution, including the evolution of the human species. This is all the more astonishing when we realize that Darwin did not have access to the knowledge which revolutionary advances in science during the last fifty years or so have placed at the disposal of today's scientists. The vast domain of molecular biology which has emerged only recently has substantiated Darwin's theory. It is only now that scientists are beginning to understand the precise details of the evolutionary process—though there still remain many mysteries to be unravelled. But facts by themselves cannot explain much unless one has a working hypothesis. It is not as though Darwin knew all that modern genetics tells us, but as with any good theory, Darwin's theory can be updated with new facts as they emerge without altering the underlying principles of that theory.

Darwin's theory is now widely accepted by scientists. A few scientists have, however, suggested that some aspects of Darwinian evolutionism need to be modified. It has been argued that the total time that has elapsed since the emergence of life is not sufficient to account for the large number of species that has evolved, if we think in terms of evolution taking place at a gradual pace. According to Stephen Jay Gould, Darwinian theory indicates very slow and gradual changes. Gould's view is that while there were long periods when almost no change took place, there were short phases when there was a burst of evolutionary activity. This is different from the suggestion that large changes occurred in one jump. It only means that some critical mutations might lead to a quickening of evolution for brief periods. The evolutionary process was speeded up by these bursts.

Gould's argument is mainly derived from his interpretation of fossil evidence. Gould himself is a palaeontologist, i.e. a specialist in the study of fossils. As we noted earlier, fossils were some of the earliest clues that

pointed in the direction of evolution. While nineteenth century geology was of limited help in making sense of fossil finds, the breakthroughs in the discipline came about in the latter half of the twentieth century with advances in chemistry and physics. These advances (which have also enriched geology) have made palaeontology a much more precise science. We now have a fairly good idea about species which have become extinct. Palaeontologists like Gould find it disturbing that there are some very big gaps in the fossil evidence. These gaps, it is pointed out, cannot be only due to the fact that fossils belonging to intermediate stages have not been discovered. What if there never were any intermediate stages? This is the main question posed by Gould. If evolution occurred in jerks or bursts then this is the kind of fossil evidence that we would have. Richard Dawkins, an eminent zoologist, has comprehensively refuted Gould's argument by emphasizing that such sudden bursts of change would initially make adaptation very unlikely for the group with different characteristics. There are several ways in which gaps in fossil evidence can be explained. The most obvious is that a small group could have got separated from the main population and might have started evolving in isolation. If after a long period of evolution during which it evolved into a new species, it returned to the original location, the fossil evidence in that location might show up two different species without the intermediate stages. For us to know of the intermediate stages of evolution we would also have to find fossils at the site where the separatee¹ group had evolved. Such comprehensive findings are unlikely. We are thus left with big gaps.

II

Among the species which are extant, apes and monkeys bear the closest resemblance to human beings. Monkeys, apes and humans all share a large number of characteristics. They are all placed by scientists in one broad group. To use scientific terminology, they are classified as belonging to the same

order. Monkeys, apes and humans (and a few other animals like lemurs) belong to the order 'primate'. Primates are part of a broader group, i.e. mammalian vertebrates. All vertebrates (fish, amphibians, birds, reptiles and mammals) have a backbone which is a column of discs (vertebrae) enclosing the spinal cord. This backbone gives internal support to the body. Mammals have four legs or limbs. Their bodies are covered with hair. They are warm-blooded animals, i.e. their body temperature remains relatively constant. Female mammals give birth to live offspring—they do not lay eggs. There are however some rare species of mammals like the platypus and the anteater in which the females lay eggs (monotreme mammals). Then there are some species of mammals in which the young are born before being properly developed. These are termed marsupials. The mother has a pouch—the most familiar example is the kangaroo—in which the baby marsupial completes its development. What is common to all mammals is that the female of the species has mammary glands which secrete milk to feed the young.

The earliest primates evolved with features which enabled them to adapt to living efficiently in trees. Primates have features which allow them to climb and move about on trees with great ease. They use their forelimbs extensively. Their nails are flattened and the thumb of the hand is opposed to the forefinger. Primates possess what are called 'prehensile' hands and feet (hands and feet which are adapted for grasping). With these they can move up and down tree trunks or from branch to branch by grasping and clutching. Those mammals which do not have this trait have to rely on other means, as for instance digging in their claws, in order to hold on to trees or branches. The shape of primate hands and feet gives them a firm hold or clutch over tree trunks and branches. Among primates, claws have got reduced and nails have become flattened (compare with cats or dogs). The way in which the fingers have evolved (they are separated from each other), and the opposition of the thumb to the forefinger, makes it possible for primates to

put their hands *around* an object and to enclose it. Moreover, the forelimbs have the capacity to rotate, to flex and to extend.

During their evolution primates have acquired stereoscopic vision. This means that their eyeballs are located in such a position that the two fields of vision combine to give a three-dimensional picture of their surroundings. Stereoscopic vision makes it easier for them to gauge distance and depth, which is important for moving about in trees. Some other animals, for example birds like the falcon, too possess stereoscopic vision.

Primates began evolving about 70 million years ago. For several million years they evolved as competent tree-dwellers. Their special features—prehensile hands and feet; extensive use of forelimbs; stereoscopic vision etc.—were designed for adaptation to an *arboreal habitat* (living in trees). Trees provided them with almost everything that they required for subsistence, mainly fruit, leaves, insects and bird's eggs. They moved about among branches and jumped from tree to tree without having to come down on the ground. People in most parts of India are familiar with monkeys and the ease with which they move about in trees.

All the living and extinct species of primates are classified into two subgroups, or *suborders*: the 'prosimii' and the 'anthropoidea'. The prosimii (or prosimians) are more primitive and were the earliest to evolve. The suborder anthropoidea includes more advanced primates, viz., monkeys, apes and humans. The prosimii include lemurs, lorises and tarsiers. Some zoologists also classify tree-shrews ('tupaioidea') with prosimians. Tree-shrews are very small squirrel-like creatures who might represent the transition from insectivores to early primates.

The various species of prosimii are mainly found in Africa and South Asia. Lemurs are confined only to Madagascar. These primates are relatively small in size. However they possess very large eyes. The eyes are placed close together at the front of the skull (not on the sides). What distinguishes prosimii from anthropoidea is the

structure of the bones in which the eyeballs are placed. The eyeballs of the prosimii are located in a ring-like structure, whereas the eye sockets of the anthropoidea are bowl-like in shape. The ring-like structure of bones in which the eyeballs of the prosimii are placed, restricts the field of vision of these creatures. The bowl-like shape of the anthropoidea eye sockets gives greater freedom to the eyeballs to move in different directions and at various angles. This was important for better sight.

The anthropoidea first got separated from the prosimii about 40 million years ago with the evolution of the monkeys. The suborder anthropoidea is divided into three subgroups, or *superfamilies*. Two superfamilies are those of monkeys. These two superfamilies are labelled 'cercopithecoidea' (Old World monkeys) and 'ceboidea' (New World monkeys). The differences between them relate largely to their dental structures, and need not detain us. Suffice it to say that monkeys had highly developed forelimbs, better vision, flatter faces and shorter snouts as compared to prosimians. Their adaptation to an arboreal habitat was extremely specialized. They could cover long distances in jumping from tree to tree. In some species like the *langur* an elongated tail could be used almost as an additional limb. The tail also helped to balance the body while jumping. The *langur* can clear remarkably long distances in jumping from one tree to another and its graceful jump is almost like a short flight. This is illustrative of very specialized adaptation to an arboreal habitat. The dexterous prehensile limbs of monkeys represent an important stage in our own evolution. In the late nineteenth century there was overwhelming resistance to Darwin's suggestion that we are descended from monkeys. The similarities are so obvious, but there is often a failure to recognize the 'descent'. This reflects a particular way of thinking, which is not very easy to change. Usually when one sees a monkey, say, peeling a banana, the immediate reaction is that the monkey's way of handling objects with its hand is so very like that of humans. Monkeys learnt to

use their hands the way we do much before humans evolved. Therefore it is we who behave like them rather than the other way around.

The next stage in our evolutionary history was the emergence of apes about 30 million years ago. Apes and humans are placed in the *superfamily* 'hominoidea' which is the third superfamily of the suborder anthropoidea (the other two being those to which the monkeys belong). There are several species of apes: chimpanzees, gorillas, gibbons, orang-utans etc. They are all collectively grouped in the *family* 'pongidae' (to repeat: order, suborder, superfamily, family, genus, and species are some of the categories used by zoologists for classifying animals). In other words the superfamily hominoidea is divided into two families: (i) pongidae (apes); and (ii) hominidae (human beings and extinct species of the closest ancestors of humans). Apes and humans belong to the same superfamily and are closest to each other among surviving species. They probably first separated from monkeys in the extensive African forests. The evolution of apes was one way of adapting to the environment in a somewhat different way. Apes are relatively larger in size than monkeys. They have large canine teeth and are powerfully built. Some species of apes (chimpanzees, gorillas and orang-utans) have long forelimbs as compared to their hindlimbs. Others, like the gibbon have a small body and long arms and legs. (The gibbon and siamang are therefore placed by some zoologists in a family of their own—'hylobatidae'.) Unlike monkeys, apes are not adapted exclusively to an arboreal habitat. They climb trees in search of food and for protection, but they attempt to regularly exploit resources on the ground as well. Gorillas are heavy animals and spend most of their time on the ground. Adult chimpanzees too have some difficulty in moving about in trees with agility. Gorillas and chimpanzees adopt a semi-erect posture while walking on the ground. They use their legs and hands for movement and rely on their knuckles to assist them while walking. The pattern of subsistence evolved by apes was a success and by about 20

million years ago the number of ape species in Africa was larger than that of monkeys.

It was around this time that some significant developments were taking place. Fossil evidence has revealed the evolution of an ape which lived in Africa about 20 million years ago and was very well adapted to living on the ground. This type is referred to as 'dryopithecus'. From Africa this species moved into Asia about 15 million years ago. We learn from geologists that 15 million years ago the African-Arabian landmass collided with Asia thereby bringing the two continents together. This created the conditions for expansion from Africa into Asia. A branch of the dryopithecus then separated and evolved into a small apelike creature which has been named 'ramapithecus'. The first fossils of ramapithecus were discovered in India (in the 1930s).

Subsequently in the early 1960s it was suggested that ramapithecus was the earliest known species of hominidae. In other words that ramapithecus represented the point at which hominids (hominidae) separated from apes (pongidae). However the fossil evidence on which the initial interpretation was based was extremely scanty—a small fragment of the jaw. Extensive work is still going on in the Siwalik hills to discover ramapithecus fossils, and there have been some discoveries in the Rawalpindi area. Ramapithecus was adapted to environments in which forest growth was not very dense. But it is doubtful whether it could walk upright. Ramapithecus became extinct about 8 million years ago.

Recent advances in molecular biology have reduced our dependence on fossil evidence. Molecular evidence (this mainly involves comparing DNA of living species and calculating the rate at which changes—mutation—might have occurred) has brought to light a startling feature of the evolutionary process. The evolutionary paths of Asian and African apes diverged a very long time ago. *In terms of their DNA, Asian apes are much more different from African apes, than African apes are from humans.* Humans stand much closer to

African apes than was suspected earlier. Asian apes had begun evolving differently almost 15 million years ago, when they moved into Asia. The ramapithecus belongs to this evolutionary process (12 million years ago). The African apes diverged from Asian apes 15 million years ago and proceeded along a different path. There are now three surviving species of African apes. These are the gorilla and the common and pygmy chimpanzee. 7 million years ago African apes got split into two branches. One of the branches led directly to human beings. The revised picture of human evolution that we now have suggests (i) that humans are descended from African apes (gorilla, chimpanzee), rather than Asian apes and (ii) that the earliest humans got separated from African apes relatively recently, i.e. 7 million years ago (not 15 million years ago, as was thought earlier).

If we accept evidence from molecular biology then we can date the earliest hominids (hominidae) to about 7 million years ago. Unfortunately there is a big gap in the fossil record for the critical period between 8 million and 4 million years ago. The fossils which belong to the period from about 4 million years ago indicate that hominids evolved in two phases. The first phase was marked by the development of 'bipedalism' or 'bipedal locomotion', i.e. walking on two feet. The second phase saw rapid expansion in brain size. The Darwinian view was that both features had evolved simultaneously. This view has persisted in the present century. In all fairness to Darwin, it needs to be pointed out that Darwin's understanding was mainly based on comparative anatomy, a comparison of the physical structures of living species and apes. No early human fossils were available in Darwin's time (with the exception of neanderthal fossils). Generally too the study of fossils was in its infancy. However even with more fossil evidence in the twentieth century some scholars have found it difficult to abandon the view that bipedalism and large brain size developed together. It needs to be emphasized that there was a gap of at least 3 million years between the two developments.

Fossil evidence when combined with molecular evidence points towards the beginnings of bipedalism 7 million years

ago. Some species of African apes became bipedal about this time. This might have been caused by environmental changes leading to more open grasslands. The lower limbs (legs) of these apes increased in length as compared to their upper limbs. They acquired an erect posture. They could walk on two feet. This development did not immediately result in an increase in brain size. As W. E. Le Gros Clarke observes in his work *The Fossil Evidence for Human Evolution*, whereas size of brain is certainly the distinctive feature of humans, it is not the distinctive feature of hominidae vis-à-vis pongidae. According to Le Gros Clarke initially the crucial difference between early hominids and apes lay in bipedalism among early hominids.

Of the different species of bipedal apes that might have evolved soon after 7 million years ago, probably one developed a large brain size. This bipedal creature with a significantly larger brain separated from other bipedal hominids about 2.5 million years ago, and began making crude tools somewhat later.

Before proceeding further it is necessary to mention that modern humans are the only surviving species of hominidae. All other species are extinct and the only information that we have of them is derived from fossils. On the basis of fossils the hominids (including our own species) are divided into two *genera*: the *genus* 'australopithecus' and the *genus* 'homo'. Of these, australopithecus was the first to evolve. What separated it from the apes was the ability to walk upright, on the two lower limbs. Australopithecus fossils were originally discovered and recognized in 1924 by Raymond Dart in South Africa. It was Dart who labelled the fossil as 'australopithecus' (southern ape). What Dart had discovered was a fossil of 'australopithecus africanus' which lived between 3 and 1 million years ago. Later, a number of other fossils of australopithecus were discovered in South Africa. Some of them had features which differed from those of australopithecus africanus. A close scrutiny of these features indicated that there were actually two different species: australopithecus africanus and australopithecus

robustus. The robustus had large cheek teeth, and a flatter forehead as compared to the africanus. The africanus forehead was steeper (sloping downwards) and the skull was more rounded at the top. Robustus males had a bony-crest at the top of their skulls. In both the species the cheek teeth (molars and premolars) differed from those of apes. Unlike apes, australopithecus cheek teeth were flat which suggests they were adapted to grinding tough plant foods rather than soft fruit. It has been suggested that while australopithecus robustus was herbivorous, australopithecus africanus was omnivorous (i.e. its diet included meat), but such specialization is not fully established. Incidentally, males of australopithecus species are much larger in size than females (this is called 'sexual dimorphism'). This feature gradually disappeared with the evolution of homo.

In the 1950s important discoveries of australopithecus fossils were made in East Africa. The husband and wife team of Louis and Mary Leakey found australopithecus remains in Tanzania at sites located in the Olduvai Gorge. They were fossils of a species which was different from the robustus and africanus. This species was named 'zinjanthropus', and is now labelled 'australopithecus boisei'.

The most recent evidence pertaining to australopithecines has come from Ethiopia (Omo Valley; Hadar). Australopithecus fossils found here have been identified as belonging to a species which evolved much earlier than boisei, robustus and africanus. This species which has pushed back the date for australopithecines to about 4 million years ago, has been named 'australopithecus afarensis'. Australopithecus afarensis might be the ancestor of all other australopithecus species. This is a controversial point and remains to be resolved. As of now this is the earliest known species of hominidae.

In australopithecus afarensis we can see the final stages of transition to bipedal locomotion. This species had acquired an erect posture but it still retained some characteristics of apes. The development of bipedal locomotion is a very complex process and requires several

changes in the anatomy. The bones of the feet undergo modifications which enable them to carry the entire weight of the body. Similarly knees and the pelvic girdle (the 'box' to which lower bones are attached) have to be shaped in such a way that a comfortable erect posture can be maintained while walking or running on two feet. The pelvic girdle has to accommodate large leg muscles and at the same time hold the weight of the body.

The backbone too has to be shaped accordingly. This is necessitated by the requirements of the thorax or chest. In apes the backbone is inward-curving or concave ('c' shaped). This shape can be a hindrance for regular upright posture. The weight of the thorax, which is located on the inside of the curve, would make the animal fall forward. An adjustment in the shape of the backbone from concave to convex or outward-curving ensures better balance (in fact the human backbone is 's' shaped). This assists in erect posture. In the process of evolving bipedal locomotion, the shape of the thorax too has changed from being funnel-shaped or conical in apes to cylindrical in humans.

While *australopithecus afarensis* possessed most of the essential features of bipedalism there were still a few survivals of apelike traits. The lower limbs were relatively shorter as compared to humans; the thorax was still conical in shape and the fingers were much more curved as in chimpanzees.

As we have seen, *australopithecus* had definitely developed bipedalism by about 4 million years ago. There is a big gap in the fossil record for the period prior to that, but in view of the molecular evidence it would appear that this process had been at work since 7 million years ago when the earliest bipedal apes might have begun to evolve. The point about the large number of anatomical changes (outlined above) required for bipedalism is that it would have taken considerable time for these changes to accumulate. However, for several million years, from 7 million years ago to 2.5 million years ago, there was no vital increase in brain size. *Australopithecus* brain size (450 c.c.

to 550 c.c.) was not very different from that of the apes (470 c.c. for chimpanzees). Increase in brain size occurred between 3 and 2 million years ago. The possibilities for this had been created partly by changes in the teeth and jaws. The canines were reduced in size and the lower jaw became lighter. Since the lower jaw was lighter, the bones of the upper part of the skull too could be correspondingly lighter as they did not have to support a heavy mobile lower jaw. This in turn meant that more room was available to the brain. The brain could expand into the space created by thinner/lighter bones in the upper part of the skull.

These changes led to a new evolutionary path, culminating in the emergence of modern humans. Human beings and their immediate ancestors are placed in the genus *homo*. The genus *homo* is distinguished from *australopithecus* by its larger brain size. One of the oldest fossils of the genus *homo* is that of the '*homo habilis*'. This was found near Lake Turkana in Kenya. Other specimens have been discovered at Olduvai. *Homo habilis* lived 2 million years ago and had a brain which was considerably larger than that of *australopithecus*. Its brain size was 800 c.c. *Homo habilis* was a tool-maker. For several years there was a reluctance to accept *homo habilis* as a species of the genus *homo* and in some books it is placed in the category of *australopithecus*. But a close examination of the brain size of the adult *homo habilis* has entitled it to be regarded as an early human specimen.

The emergence of *homo habilis* was followed by the emergence of another species of *homo*: '*homo erectus*'. *Homo erectus* fossils date back to 1.75 million years ago. The earliest *homo erectus* fossils are from East Turkana in Kenya. *Homo erectus* was almost like modern human beings. Apart from bipedal locomotion and well-developed hands it had a large brain. It was much taller than the *australopithecus*. The *homo erectus* brain was about 1000 c.c., which is nearly 70% the size of *homo sapiens* brains. *Homo erectus* made tools with great skill (tool technologies will be discussed in the next chapter). From the time of *homo erectus* onwards,

homo began to move out of Africa into Asia and Europe. All fossils belonging to *australopithecus* and *homo habilis* have been discovered exclusively in South and East Africa, confirming Darwin's conjecture that humans originated in Africa. With *homo erectus*, the immediate ancestors of humans spread to other parts of the world. Richard Leakey has calculated that the migration out of Africa may have been at the rate of 20 kilometres per generation, thus covering 14,000 kilometres between East Africa and China in 20,000 years. Nevertheless the majority of *homo erectus* might have continued to live in Africa.

The fossils of *homo erectus* were first discovered in Indonesia. These were fossils of *pithecanthropus* found in Java (the terminology can sometimes be confusing depending on the date when a label was used and the individual preferences of scholars, but it should be borne in mind that '*pithecanthropus erectus*', '*pithecanthropus javanensis*', '*Java Man*', '*pithecanthropus pekinensis*', '*sinanthropus*', etc. are now all conveniently called *homo erectus*). *Homo erectus* fossils are also found in China and parts of Europe. The Indonesian *homo erectus* fossils are at least 900,000 years old and the Chinese fossils are 500-350,000 years old.

For nearly 60-70,000 years different species of *australopithecus*, *homo habilis* and *homo erectus* coexisted. Natural selection eventually led to the extinction of *australopithecus* and *homo habilis*. From 1 million years ago only *homo* thrived. This should not be taken to mean that *homo erectus* was more successful at adaptation. After all *australopithecus* had survived for at least 3 million years, if not longer, whereas *homo erectus* existed for 1.5 million years. The possible reasons for the extinction of *australopithecus* continue to be the subject of a lively debate.

Homo erectus became extinct nearly 400,000 years ago. Meanwhile a new species of *homo* had branched out and embarked on a separate path of evolution. This new species of *homo* emerged about 125,000 years ago (135,000 years ago according to some scholars). These were the neanderthals.

Neanderthals were early homo sapiens (they are named 'homo sapiens neanderthalensis'; our species is named 'homo sapiens sapiens'). Their fossils were first discovered in Germany in 1856 and have been widely known ever since. In neanderthals, brain size saw further expansion, stone tools became more efficient and what we recognize as 'culture' became more and more visible. But the neanderthal skulls were thicker and less rounded at the top than those of modern humans.

The neanderthal population began to dwindle about 50,000 years ago, and the species became extinct 34,000 years ago. What should be underlined is that neanderthals represented only one evolutionary path of the genus homo. Strictly speaking, true neanderthal fossils have been mainly found, in parts of Europe and West Asia, but other fossils which closely resemble modern humans have been found in various parts of Africa. It is likely that around 125,000 years ago early homo sapiens separately branched into neanderthals and 'homo sapiens sapiens' (modern humans). On the basis of recent fossil and molecular evidence, Richard Leakey has put forth a strong argument for the African origin of homo sapiens sapiens. In any case there were several types of homo sapiens which coexisted for a long time. Apart from neanderthals, these homo sapiens include species whose fossils have been found at Broken Hill in Zambia (110,000 years); Qafzeh in West Asia (92,000 years); and Cro-Magnon in West Europe (40,000 years). One of these might have evolved into homo sapiens sapiens and coexisted with the rest down to about 40-30,000 years ago when all other species (and subspecies) became extinct leaving only our species: Subsequently there has been no evolution at the species or subspecies level and even though there are some superficial differences (complexion, stature, etc.) homo sapiens sapiens remains a unified and homogeneous species.

With the emergence of homo sapiens sapiens the size of the brain increased to an average of 1350 c.c. However scholars are divided in their opinion as to whether mere increase in brain size had much significance once

neanderthals and other homo sapiens had evolved. With neanderthals the size of the brain had equalled that of homo sapiens sapiens. What then was the direction of further evolution? This is a difficult question to answer because it is linked to the problem of defining what is so very specific about homo sapiens sapiens—brain size, or speech, or ability to make increasingly complex tools, or a high level of social interaction.

A larger brain when combined with well developed hands which were free because they were not used for locomotion had revolutionary consequences, as was demonstrated by the rapid development of tool technology. Augmentation of brain size had already reached a point where it was possible to make tools requiring a high level of skill.

The focus has now shifted to understanding the social context of human behaviour. Homo sapiens sapiens were better equipped for social interaction and cooperation than other homo sapiens. Some scientific evidence has been put forth in support of this view. Philip Lieberman has carefully studied the shape and size of the skull and neck of modern humans in relation to neanderthals and apes. The skull of homo sapiens sapiens acquired a globular shape, which differs from the low and bulging skull of neanderthals. The shape of the modern human skull introduced modifications in the shape of the neck, the most important being that the sound resonating portion of our throats (between the vocal cords and the back of the mouth) was able to produce a greater variety of sounds. Though other primates, as well as other animals communicate by producing sounds, modern humans are unique in the variety of sounds they can produce. These can be combined in an infinite number of ways which is reflected in the vast number of languages (living and dead) that human societies have produced.

Language is now seen by a large number of scholars as the key to understanding the specificity of homo sapiens sapiens. This is not just a question of producing a variety of sounds for communication but is also related to our

capacity to arrange our ideas (thought) with the help of language. This in turn is associated with both the size of the brain and to the manner in which different parts of the brain are organized. Recent studies have indicated that while the size of the brain in neanderthals was the same as that of our species, there was still scope for changes in the structure of the brain which facilitated the development of language.

Apart from its other functions, language allowed humans to transmit knowledge and information to successive generations in a manner that is not possible for other animals. This means that each generation does not have to start from the scratch. It can build upon the accumulated experience of previous generations. A more developed brain allowed the information to be stored. This accelerated the pace of cultural adaptation and humans were no longer dependent on biological evolution. This is a theme which we will examine in greater detail in the following chapter.

Chapter Two

PALEOLITHIC AGE

WE saw in the previous chapter that hominids began making tools about 2.5 million years ago. *Australopithecus robustus* may have been the first tool-maker, though this is yet to be convincingly established. We can, however, be reasonably certain that *homo habilis* was a tool-maker. According to Richard Leakey regular tool-making commenced with the emergence of *homo habilis*. The larger brain size of *homo habilis* played a pivotal role in this development. Evidence for the beginnings of stone tool manufacture has been found at Olduvai. Hence the oldest stone tool culture is named 'Oldowan'. Louis and Mary Leakey were pioneers in discovering the Oldowan culture. They established that human ancestors first became tool-makers in East Africa. Oldowan is the oldest known paleolithic (early stone age) culture.

The earliest tools made by *homo habilis* were extremely crude and rudimentary. It requires considerable expertise to identify these tools. The tools are small in size and often made from pebbles. A small piece of stone would be hit with another stone to manufacture the tool. This is not as easy as it sounds. It should be emphasized that this involved the *making* of tools, not merely using naturally available stones. A conscious attempt was made to give the stone a sharp edge or point. In this humans are unique. Chimpanzees are known to use tools, as for example sticks to procure insects for food. But chimpanzees do not use tools on a regular

basis, and they certainly are not able to make stone tools. On the other hand tools have been an integral part of the adaptive strategy of the genus homo for 2.5 million years.

The increase in the size of the brain in early humans was crucial for their tool-making ability. The reason why australopithecus might not have been a tool-maker is that it had a much smaller brain. It is now recognized that even the most rudimentary tools require a high level of intelligence which the australopithecus perhaps lacked. Nicholas Toth is a scholar who has spent several years studying stone tool techniques. He has tried to master these techniques by actually making stone tools of the type which were manufactured during the early stone age. Toth has demonstrated that a lot of skill went into making even crude tools. Appropriate types of stone had to be selected and the maker had to know the angle at which to strike as well as the amount of force required. Incidentally, Toth also demonstrated that homo habilis was right-handed—the preference for a particular hand is another human trait.

A highly specialized hand, and bipedalism (which led to 'freeing' the specialized hand so that it could be used for other purposes, e.g. making tools) are, of course, important prerequisites for making tools. However, the real breakthrough comes about with a large brain. Tool manufacture calls for a high degree of motor skills and coordination of various parts of the body (eyes, limbs, fingers etc.) as well as enormous concentration. Moreover tool-making involves a certain measure of conceptualization. The concept of the tool precedes the tool. The tool-maker should be able to form a mental image of the tool which is to be obtained. All these functions can only be performed with greater mental capacity. There can be no doubt that the larger brain of homo habilis (800 c.c.) and homo erectus (1000 c.c. and beyond) and the beginnings of tool-making were closely interlinked.

Oldowan tools mark the beginning of the paleolithic age. Paleolithic is the earliest phase of human prehistory. In this age humans lived by gathering plant foods (foraging) and

hunting animals. *Generally speaking, paleolithic economy was characterized by hunting and plant gathering.* The tools made during this period were meant to assist humans in procuring and processing plant and animal foods. Like apes, australopithecus mainly subsisted on a plant diet. Australopithecus might have occasionally included some very small animals in their diet. This is true of apes as well. Initially homo habilis also continued with this pattern. Oldowan tools were used mainly for cutting plant foods, breaking nuts, digging roots, scraping wood, and obtaining honey.

As a meat-eater homo habilis would have been able to kill small animals which could be easily overpowered (e.g. some species of antelopes), but otherwise it usually consumed remains of animals killed by other predators (scavenging). The Oldowan tools were used for skinning the meat of these animals and for extracting bone-marrow. Bone-marrow is a rich source of nourishment. We are not very certain about the extent to which meat was included in the homo habilis diet. In any case, at the beginning of the paleolithic age, humans were essentially scavengers rather than hunters. Growing efficiency in making tools did create the conditions for the transition from scavenging to hunting. This meant that a larger quantity of meat could now be included in the homo diet.

Some prehistorians have pointed out that we cannot deduce the beginnings of meat-eating merely from the shape of Oldowan tools. Just because a tool *can* be used for slicing meat does not necessarily mean that it *was* actually used for that purpose. This has led paleontologists and archeologists to apply more rigorous methods to the study of fossilized animal remains found at sites where the earliest stone tools have been discovered. Advanced scientific techniques have helped scholars to pinpoint evidence of cut marks on animal bone fossils dating back to over 1.5 million years. These cut marks were caused by stone tools in the process of separating meat from the bone. These studies on bones have shown that early humans had made meat a regular part of their diet between 2 million and 1.5 million years ago.

Further assessment of the evidence (types of bones found at the spot; whether these bones constitute the fleshiest parts of an animal or are likely to be leftovers, etc.) indicates that homo started out as scavengers and killers of very small animals, and only gradually became competent hunters.

By the time homo erectus emerged, hunting had become well-established. The typical pattern of paleolithic adaptation, viz. hunting and foraging, was now the basis of the economy. Homo erectus tools were more efficient, requiring more complex techniques. The tools were standardized and made according to a repeatable pattern. Nicholas Toth, whom we have already mentioned above, has noted that when humans first started making tools they did not produce tools according to a specific design. They did of course have a general concept of what they required (e.g. a sharp edge for cutting). What seems to have happened is that they hit one stone against another at one or two points. They then selected, from the bits (flakes) which broke off, those pieces or flakes of stone which most closely resembled the tool they had in mind and which were most likely to serve their purpose. This was the technique employed for making Oldowan tools. As we have seen, even these tools reflect great physical dexterity. Nevertheless they are simple tools as compared to those manufactured by homo erectus. In homo erectus tools we see an attempt to impose a predetermined 'design' on the stone. This reflects more accumulated experience and a higher level of intelligence.

The most prominent tool of homo erectus was the 'handaxe'. Handaxe tools are pear-shaped or teardrop-shaped. They are pointed at one end and broad at the other. Handaxes are much larger in size than Oldowan tools and are remarkably symmetrical. The homo erectus handaxe is a 'core' tool. There are two broad groups of stone tools: 'core tools' and 'flake tools'. Flake tools are stone tools which are fashioned from the small bits or flakes which come off a block of stone when it is hit. Core tools are those which are made from the larger block or 'core'. In the case of handaxes the core itself is worked upon to produce a tool.

The culture which evolved with homo erectus is called 'Acheulian', named after a site in north France (St. Acheul). Many paleolithic cultures are named after French sites, where they were initially identified. This does not mean that they are confined to France (or Western Europe) alone, but is only a convenient way of referring to those cultures. Acheulian handaxe culture developed 1.4 million years ago and was closely associated with homo erectus almost throughout the world. It continued up to 150,000 years ago. Acheulian tools have been found in East, South and West Africa; in Spain, France and several other parts of Europe; and in West Asia, India and some other regions of South Asia. However handaxes have not been found at homo erectus dwelling sites in the Far East.

Handaxes were primarily used for processing meat. J. Desmond Clarke, who experimented with these tools, has suggested that the handaxe was 'an all purpose skinning tool and meat chopper'. By now humans were hunting and eating large animals. At the Acheulian site of Torralba in Spain, remains of elephants consumed by homo erectus have been found. It is not certain as to how these large animals were hunted. Either some kind of trap was laid for them or else they were driven into swamps or marshes and killed when they got stuck. It should be borne in mind that traps would have been one of the frequently used methods for hunting animals.

Recently another theory has been advanced about the use to which handaxes were put. Handaxes were not the only tools used by homo erectus. They used smaller tools as well (including flake tools) many of which were much more useful for cutting or slicing meat. It has been suggested that the purpose of the handaxe was somewhat different. The tool was a weapon which could be thrown like a discus. The shape of the handaxe is such that if it is expertly thrown its pointed side can hit objects at some distance with great force. In their capacity as weapons, handaxes could have been used both for hunting prey as well as for defence against predators.

What is astonishing is the uniformity which the technique of making handaxes exhibits over most of the regions inhabited by homo erectus. Wherever homo erectus went they carried this technique with them and handed down the technique from generation to generation for more than a million years. The standardization of a relative complex way of making tools can only be achieved with a more developed brain as well as through improved communication/social interaction.

Increase in the size of the brain itself created conditions for better social interaction. The large size of the brain when seen in the context of bipedal locomotion imposed certain limitations of a purely biological nature. But these limitations had far-reaching implications. As we noted in the previous chapter, bipedal locomotion involved several modifications in the structure of the pelvic girdle (hip bones, etc.)- These modifications produced a narrower birth canal among females. On the other hand an offspring with a larger brain had to pass through this narrow canal. During human evolution there was some subsequent increase in the size of the opening, but bipedal locomotion could not accommodate enlargement beyond a certain point due to the requirements of bipedal locomotion. Given these limitations the child would have to be born when its brain was still very small. The brain would have to go through substantial growth after birth in order to attain its full size.

The human brain is just about one-third its full size at the time of birth {as against half in the case of apes). This makes the human child extremely vulnerable, causing it to be so very dependent on the mother. The child has to be carefully tended while its brain increases in size. The length of time required for this development creates a strong mother-child bond. This bond forms the nucleus of a social group in which the child grows up. A few human adults, male and female, provided protection and food for the offspring as they grew to adulthood. Such a group provided the conditions for the development of the children which in turn was essential for the survival of humans.

A human child takes several years to grow into an adult. Although the brain increases in size very rapidly after birth, physical growth of other parts of the body takes much longer. The length of time over which this growth takes place imparts stability to the mother-child bond and the social group which this bond sustains. This provides the child an opportunity to learn survival skills and imbibe elements of *culture*. The larger size of the brain enables a vast amount of information to be stored. The development of rudimentary language facilitated the communication and accumulation of information. No wonder then that homo erectus groups were so successful at imparting knowledge of complex tool-making techniques generation after generation. Obviously each generation would have added its own bits of information based on its own experience.

As humans spread to different parts of the Old World they tried to adapt to their specific environments in different ways. They introduced variations in tool techniques. We have already seen that the handaxe was not used in the Far East. Here smaller chopping tools were preferred. In some parts of north Europe and England core tools which differed from the Acheulian handaxe were manufactured. These were the Clactonian and Levalloisian cultures. Clactonian tools were turtle shaped, while Levalloisian tools were round. It should also be emphasized that whereas we have been referring only to stone tools so far, tools were made from other material as well. Wood and bone were certainly used, but tools made from such highly perishable material do not survive easily in the archeological record. Wood, for instance, was used for digging up roots, tubers and bulbs.

Homo erectus began using fire about 700,000 years ago, though it has been suggested that the use of fire is much older. Fire had several advantages. It could be used for cooking meat; for removing poisonous substances from plants; for scaring away animals; and for keeping warm. It took a long time for early humans to master the technique of making fire. Initially they used fire that was naturally caused. These could be bush or forest fires or fires caused

by lightening. Wooden logs which had caught fire naturally, and kept smouldering for some time, were a useful source of fire. Care would be taken to ensure that fire was not easily extinguished. One of the best known homo erectus sites which has yielded definite evidence about the early use of fire is located in North China. This is the site of Zhoukoudien, situated at a short distance from Beijing. Zhoukoudien is approximately 500,000 years old. It was occupied by homo erectus for a considerable length of time. Apart from Zhoukoudien, Hoxne in England and Torralba in Spain have also provided evidence of the beginnings of the use of fire.

The paleolithic cultures which we have referred to so far (Oldowan, Acheulian, Clactonian, Levalloisian) are all 'lower paleolithic' cultures. These also include the lower paleolithic chopper tools of China, Indonesia and some parts of Africa. Lower paleolithic cultures were followed by the 'middle paleolithic'. The most significant culture of the middle paleolithic is the Mousterian culture, named after the French site of Le Moustier. Mousterian culture was the product of neanderthals. Before outlining some of the features of this culture let us make a digression and look at the environmental conditions in which the paleolithic cultures evolved. This is essential for a better understanding of the natural setting of the paleolithic.

Most of the paleolithic age coincided with the phase of Earth's history which is labelled 'pleistocene epoch' by geologists. As we noted in chapter I, advances in geology have been vital for the study of prehistory. Geology provides a chronological framework for the evolution of the Earth, and many aspects of the remote past have to be viewed in the context of this chronology. Moreover, from a careful study of rocks, geologists have been able to work out details about the environmental conditions which prevailed during the distant past. Geologists divide the history of planet Earth into 'eons', which are subdivided into 'eras'. Subdivisions of era are called 'periods' which in turn are subdivided into 'epochs'. In geological terms periods and epochs have small

time spans. For our purpose it is sufficient to note that we live in the geological era called 'cenozoic'. Cenozoic began 65 million years ago when the landmasses on the Earth acquired their present position and shape. Scientists have established that there was a time when the various continents were almost joined together to form one large landmass (Pangea). Subsequently over several hundred million years the continents drifted apart and the present map of Earth's surface was formed 65 million years ago. This marks the beginning of the cenozoic era. The cenozoic era is subdivided into two periods, 'tertiary' and 'quaternary'. The tertiary period had five epochs: 'paleocene' (65 million to 56.5 million years ago); 'eocene' (56.5 million to 35.4 million years ago); 'oligocene' (35.4 million to 23.3 million years ago); 'miocene' (23.3 million to 5.2 million years ago); and 'pliocene' (5.2 million to 1.64 million years ago). Primates had begun evolving about 70 million years ago and at the beginning of the cenozoic the prosimii were in existence. Bipedalism began evolving during the miocene leading to the emergence. The genus homo evolved during the pliocene and it was during this epoch that hominids began making tools.

Major advances in tool technology were made during the following period, the quaternary. The quaternary is subdivided into two geological epochs: pleistocene (1.64 million years to 12,000 years ago) and 'holocene' (12,000 years ago to the present, i.e. we are now living in the holocene geological epoch). The paleolithic age of prehistory belongs to the pleistocene geological epoch.

During the pleistocene there was a significant lowering of temperatures all over the world. This resulted in a series of ice ages. A sizeable portion of the northern hemisphere was under ice for several hundred thousand years. Regions with temperate climate were covered with ice and glaciers. Beginning about 2.36 million years ago, ice-sheets spread southwards to large parts of the northern hemisphere. More than one-third of the northern hemisphere, right up to New York, London and Moscow was completely under these ice-

sheets. In between there were warmer intervals (called interglacials) when the ice-sheets retreated northwards. Geologists have identified several ice ages. Each glaciation (or southward spread of ice-sheets) took place at intervals of about 100,000 years. The last ice age, which is also referred to as the Wurm glaciation (the term is derived from the Alpine region where it was identified), began 118,000 years ago and was the most extensive. This ice age was preceded by an interglacial (128-118,000 years ago), during which the climate was warmer. It was during this interglacial that the earliest homo sapiens came into existence. The last ice age reached its greatest intensity 20,000 years ago. The ice ages came to end 12,000 years ago, which marks the beginning of the holocene (or post-glacial) geological epoch.

The Mousterian culture was an attempt to adapt to the warmer climatic conditions which preceded the last ice age. One would like to repeat that during the pleistocene epoch humans were still evolving biologically. But they were now capable of cultural adaptation as well. Neanderthals lived in an environment in which big game was plentiful. Seacoasts, streams and rivers which were earlier frozen or inaccessible could be exploited for new types of food like fish. Mousterian tools were more specialized and as many as sixty varieties of tools have been identified. Neanderthals were expert hunters. The animals which they hunted were mainly bison, horse, red deer and reindeer. Fish too became a part of the diet. Several Mousterian traditions developed independently in West Asia and Africa also. These were traditions of different species of early homo sapiens. They have features which resemble the neanderthal Mousterian culture very closely. Early homo sapiens seem to have produced fairly uniform cultures. The need to adapt to diverse environments did introduce variations but these are not significant. In fact some scholars have pointed out that the various middle paleolithic/Mousterian/early homo sapiens tool traditions are not fundamentally different from the tools of the lower paleolithic. Techniques evolved earlier were further refined. The really important changes came about 35,000 years ago

which marked the beginning of the upper paleolithic and the appearance of homo sapiens sapiens.

There is one sense in which Mousterian culture differs from the cultures of lower paleolithic. For the first time we find an attribute which is such an important component of human culture, namely, the careful disposal of the dead body. Mousterian sites have brought to light burial traditions of early homo sapiens. The dead body is not merely abandoned, but its disposal was undertaken with some care. The earth was dug up and the body laid out along with some tools and other objects. Early homo sapiens had begun to *think* about the phenomenon of death, thereby reflecting a much higher level of thinking and imagination. Mousterian graves have been found at Shanidar Cave in Iraq and various sites in Europe.

The upper paleolithic began 35,000 years ago. By this time homo sapiens sapiens were coming into existence and were replacing the neanderthals. The environment too had changed. The last ice age had reduced temperatures appreciably in Europe, Asia and North Africa. Stone tool technology witnessed significant improvement in this period. A large number of upper paleolithic sites have been discovered in France and Spain. Many of these sites are concentrated in southern France, and extensive work has been done on them over the past several decades. In the first half of the twentieth century the French prehistorian Henri Breuil established himself as the most outstanding authority on West European upper paleolithic sites. His work showed that there were several distinct upper paleolithic cultures. Three of these cultures are crucial for an understanding of the upper paleolithic. These are the Aurignacian, the Solutrean and the Magdalenian.

Upper paleolithic humans hunted a variety of animals including big mammals like the woolly rhinoceros and mammoth. They trapped huge arctic mammals. Bison, reindeer, horse, sea and river fish continued to be part of their diet. A wide variety of plants was eaten, some of which were tough but could be processed with the tools that

humans now possessed.

Upper paleolithic tools were increasingly specialized. Tools were made for specific purposes. A group could be using up to a hundred different types of tools. There was growing refinement in tools made for manufacturing other tools. A typical tool of this type was the 'burin'. The burin acted as a kind of chisel for making other tools. The Aurignacians were adept at making small blades with parallel edges. The edges were extremely sharp. Among the tools of the Solutrean culture one of the most characteristic is the tool with a sharp 'leaf point'. The Magdalenians made excellent harpoons which were used for fishing.

Two other features of upper paleolithic stone tools need to be mentioned. One is that the use of materials other than stone becomes more widespread. Wood, bone, ivory "and antler (deer horns) were commonly used. Second, many tools now were composite tools. They were composed of several parts, of which some parts might be made of stone and others of wood or bone. Leaf points could have been joined to wooden rods to make a spear-like weapon. These weapons could be very lethal when used for hunting. Arrows were also used for hunting and were often poisoned in order to be more effective. There were also tools for making crude clothing (from hides, etc.)- Finally a number of tools were made for scraping and chiselling wood, bone, ivory and antler for decorative purposes.

The upper paleolithic provides us with the earliest examples of art. With upper paleolithic art humans took a giant cultural leap. Art marks an entirely new phase in human history—in the development of thought and imagination. Upper paleolithic art began evolving in Eastern Europe (Hungary, Yugoslavia) and South-West Asia. Subsequently it reached its peak in Western Europe. Specimens of upper paleolithic art have been found in West Asia, Siberia, Africa and most of Europe.

Upper paleolithic art was first discovered in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In 1879 Don Marcelino de Sautuola found paintings on the roof of a cave in Altamira,

Spain. He examined the paintings carefully and suggested that they were made by early stone age people. The paintings were so brilliantly executed that de Sautuola's view that they dated back to the paleolithic was not taken seriously for a long time. The main reason was that stylistically the paintings appeared to be very modern. The realistic manner in which the paintings depicted animals in motion was considered to be beyond the capacity of paleolithic humans.

Subsequent work on the paintings confirmed that de Sautuola was correct. These were indeed paleolithic paintings. Henri Breuil did pioneering research on upper paleolithic art. Nearly 200 upper paleolithic caves are now known. These contain paintings and engravings on the walls. Apart from Altamira, another famous upper paleolithic cave is situated at Lascaux in France. Cave paintings were not the only art form produced by these cultures. Thousands of other art objects have also been found. These include handles of tools, statuettes and clay figures. These objects depict animals or have geometric designs. Interestingly a number of the clay figures portray the human female body. Whereas paintings are confined to Western Europe, other art objects are quite widespread. They have been discovered at sites in Europe, Africa and Siberia.

Sites associated with the Aurignacian culture (34,000 to 30,000 years ago) contain the first extensive evidence of upper paleolithic art. There are practically no Aurignacian paintings, but there are a number of beautifully carved ivory beads which were used for ornamentation. The Aurignacians made small animal figures using ivory and bone. They also made a flutelike wind instrument from bone. Here we see the beginnings of music as well.

In the Solutrean culture (22,000 to 18,000 years ago) cave painting emerged as a major art form. Early paintings were rough outlines but over a period of time the lines become graceful and are filled with details. The paintings were coloured by using various natural pigments. The Solutreans

were also expert at carving figures on walls of caves. This technique is called 'bas-relief (or low-relief) where the figures are slightly raised on the surface of the wall.

Upper paleolithic cave paintings reached their fullest development in the Magdalenian culture (18,000 to 11,000 years ago). This is the time when the last ice age, after reaching its greatest extent and intensity (c. 20,000 years ago) began to retreat. The climate became warmer as the culture progressed. By this time homo sapiens sapiens had spread out to different parts of the world, and had completely replaced other species of homo sapiens. V. Gordon Childe refers to the Magdalenian as the most brilliant culture created by hunter-gatherers.

Nearly 80 percent of all upper paleolithic cave paintings are from Magdalenian sites. The Magdalenians had perfected the technique of painting deep inside caves. Almost no natural light penetrated these dark interior parts of the caves. Lamps containing animal fat were used for lighting up the caves while the painters worked. This was obviously a tedious and difficult job and required considerable skill. The painters concentrated mainly on drawing animals. Many of these animals, though not all, are animals that were hunted by the Magdalenians. There are also scenes depicting humans engaged in hunting. Besides, there are some geometric patterns and a few fantastic animals (figures which combine features of different animals).

Ever since the date of upper paleolithic art was established at the beginning of the century, scholars have speculated about the underlying motives of this art. What purpose did this art have? Why did upper paleolithic people undertake such painstaking work to produce this art? These questions have given rise to a vast literature which seeks to interpret upper paleolithic art. At one end of the debate are those who feel that this is merely 'art for arts' sake', i.e. just for the aesthetic pleasure provided by art and that it is futile to see any meaning in it. At the other end are those who have read so much meaning into it that their critics have

pointed out that we should refrain from imposing meanings drawn from our experience on this art.

One thing that is immediately apparent is that it is incorrect to dismiss upper paleolithic humans as primitive people incapable of intricate patterns of thought. These are people who had attained an advanced level of artistic sophistication which reveals a highly evolved thinking process. Upper paleolithic people had their own coherent world-view. Modern anthropological studies have forced us to rethink about the concept of 'primitiveness'. Just because a society is technologically less advanced than our own does not necessarily mean that it is incapable of a profound understanding of nature and the world. In fact their understanding could at times be more sophisticated than that of a modern city-dweller. It has been pointed out that our obsession with technology does not allow us to perceive this easily.

Anthropological studies of present day hunter-gatherers have placed a wealth of information about these societies at our disposal. It is with the interpretative framework provided by these studies that prehistorians have attempted to examine the thought process which went into the making of upper paleolithic art. Breuil who, as we have noted, did pioneering research on this art was deeply influenced by the work of S. Reinach at the beginning of the twentieth century. Reinach had studied paintings made by Australian aboriginal hunters and found that these paintings were a ritual intended to improve chances of a successful hunt. Most of the animals drawn were those which they intended to hunt. Reinach drew a parallel between these and upper paleolithic paintings. Using Reinach's suggestion Breuil argued that upper paleolithic paintings were magical in nature.

The term 'magic' is used here in the sense of a ritual or practice which is intended to exert control over some objects or natural phenomena. At one level the attempt to intervene in or control nature through magic or the performance of some ritual led to a closer observation of natural phenomena

which in turn had important implications for the growth of early science. At another level magical rituals marked the beginnings of religious beliefs since they involved developing a coherent world-view—a particular way of looking at the world.

Breuil's interpretation of upper paleolithic paintings was that these were part of a magical ritual. The purpose of the ritual was to give the hunters greater control over the animals which they hunted. It was for this reason that animals like bison, reindeer and horse constituted the predominant theme of these paintings.

While most scholars have come to accept that these paintings had a ritualistic purpose, there is some disagreement about the exact objective underlying the ritual. Some prehistorians have argued that Breuil's understanding of the ritual is oversimplified. The hunters were not thinking in terms of overpowering a particular animal by just drawing it. Moreover the animals which were drawn were not always those which formed the staple diet of a particular group. Andre Leroi-Gourhan, another major authority on these paintings, has approached the problem from a different perspective. Unlike Breuil, who looked at individual animals, Leroi-Gourhan has tried to place the animals in groups. He has found that certain groups of animals are uniformly depicted in certain parts of caves.

There is a pattern in this depiction. For instance bison and horse are invariably depicted deep inside the caves. On the other hand deer were always drawn near the entrance of caves. According to Leroi-Gourhan a complex set of beliefs underlay the paintings. Their arrangement suggests that different groups of animals were linked to different natural phenomena in the mind of upper paleolithic people. He has gone further and proposed that animals were grouped according to a male-female division of nature. Some forces were supposed to represent 'maleness' and others 'femaleness'. The 'male' animals (e.g. horse, stag) were representative of the male principle, while the 'female' animals (e.g. bison, ox) represented the female principle.

Thus from these paintings we get an insight into the upper paleolithic mind and see how these people understood the forces of nature. Through their specific view of nature, in which they linked certain groups of animals to certain natural forces they hoped to gain control over nature. This is particularly seen in the case of their attempt to control what they thought was the 'male-female' principle in nature. However, Leroi-Gourhan's interpretation has been disputed by many prehistorians. Some have even stated that considering the length of time which separates our society from the upper paleolithic it is doubtful whether we can ever unravel the pattern of thinking which produced the paintings.

There is one other issue which needs to be considered. What was the nature of the ritual that was practised? This is a difficult question to answer. Much that has been said in this regard is speculative in nature. Some scholars have seen the beginnings of witchcraft here. Another hypothesis is the one propounded by Count Begouen. His view is that the ritual consisted of the *act* of drawing itself. In drawing an object the painter was performing a ritual. Begouen's suggestion is based on two significant features of the paintings. First, in many cases the figures are drawn repeatedly at the same spot in respective caves. Paintings at these spots are superimposed on previous drawings. The act of drawing at that particular spot {which could be regarded as 'sacred') seems to be more important than the painting itself. Second, the majority of the paintings are located in dark and inaccessible parts of caves. This meant that drawing the painting was a very difficult job. The act of drawing required a lot of time, labour and skill. The person drawing a figure could therefore be regarded as performing a ritual. Moreover, since the paintings were executed in remote interiors of the caves where hardly any natural light penetrated, they could not have been meant for viewing. Hence the act of drawing was itself the ritual. The appeal of this interpretation lies in its simplicity.

Paleolithic remains offer us a glimpse into the social organization of early humans. These remains have often to

be correlated with the experience of contemporary hunter-gatherers. In the lower paleolithic hominids lived in very small groups. The mother-child relationship was the nucleus around which social groups were formed. Primatology, which is the study of primate behaviour, has of late become an independent discipline in its own right. It has helped us to reconstruct the social organization of early humans. Anthropoids are generally very social in their behaviour. They live in groups of some size. There are well-defined relationships in these groups. This would have been true for the earliest humans as well. The need to carefully look after infants for a length of time reinforced cooperation among them.

Mobility was an important factor in the adaptive strategy of the paleolithic. Groups would constantly move from place to place in search of food. They however remained within a familiar environment. Plant gathering was an individual activity. It was time consuming as well. All grownup members of the group had to engage in this activity. Given the time, labour, and level of technology involved it was not possible for one person to gather food for another. Scavenging too was more of an individual activity. With the Acheulian and other homo erectus cultures social groups became somewhat larger. These groups are referred to as 'bands', and usually comprised 20-25 individuals. The core of the band was based on kinship ties, i.e. people having close blood relationships. There were some restrictions on mating within this group. Hunting required more cooperation. Such cooperation was facilitated by improved capacity for communication.

The Mousterians were accomplished hunters of big mammals. These large animals could be hunted more efficiently if this was done collectively. Tracking the animals, preparing traps for them and killing them called for enhanced cooperation. Such cooperation also provided opportunities for learning tool-making techniques and standardization of the-techniques. As a particular group grew in size, subgroups would branch off so that the

resources of an area were not overburdened. This is reflected in the large-scale migrations of hominid population from the homo erectus onwards.

By the middle paleolithic bands were no longer living in total isolation. Loose links were established with other bands who simultaneously exploited a large area. The bands as a whole did not move from place to place every few days, but relied on a more elaborate strategy. The bands would move over a large territory in a seasonal cycle. During each seasonal movement they would select an appropriate site as their 'home base'. From this home base small groups would venture forth in different directions for the purpose of hunting animals. This could necessitate absence of several days from the home base.

This arrangement involved division of labour within the bands. Males usually went out for hunting. The women stayed close to the home base, tending the children and gathering plants for food. They also hunted small game that was available near the home base. This was just a functional division of labour and should not be taken to indicate 'male prowess' at hunting. It certainly did not imply that males had superior abilities for hunting, or that hunting was a superior activity as compared to plant gathering. All these concepts arose much later, with the establishment of inequality in society.

With the emergence of homo sapiens sapiens and the transition to the upper paleolithic, communities based on a network of a large number of bands were formed. These communities contained several bands which lived in a common ecological zone and procured their food in similar ways. By coming together they engaged in hunting jointly. They exchanged objects and even mating partners. These bands congregated on certain occasions for performing rituals. The rituals, which reflect their shared beliefs, gave rise to the cave paintings of this period. Ornaments indicated group identity. Rituals and the growth of relationships based on exchange point towards the emergence of a more complex social organisation.

Language played a crucial role in this development. As Philip Lieberman has shown, even neanderthals lacked language skills possessed by *homo sapiens sapiens*. The neanderthal vocal tract is closer to that of the chimpanzee. Early *homo sapiens* did communicate more efficiently than apes or even *australopithecus* and could store a much larger amount of information, but they might not have been able to use language in the same way as we do. Once this ability was acquired it created possibilities for wider and more intensive communication. Language helped to establish and maintain links with several bands. *Homo sapiens sapiens*, moving in large groups formed through a network of mutual cooperation whose members communicated with great ease, would have been deadly for other *homo sapiens* populations. Other *homo sapiens* lived in smaller groups and did not communicate so efficiently. Within a short space of time they succumbed to the pressure of modern humans, and soon became extinct.

Throughout the paleolithic period one feature of social organization remained constant. Within the bands and even within larger groups there was *collective* access to tools and food. Plant foods were usually individually collected and consumed. Meat was shared. This sharing could involve an elaborate ritual, especially in the upper paleolithic. In this period sharing should not be confused with gifting or voluntary sharing of food by individuals with other members of the group. There simply was no concept of individual control since access to killed animals (as to tools) was collective. These concepts began to undergo changes only with the beginnings of food production.

Chapter Three

NEOLITHIC AGE

THE end of the pleistocene epoch marked the end of the ice ages. In the post-pleistocene or post-glacial epoch (which geologists refer to as the holocene epoch) climatic conditions were much warmer. Environmental changes meant that post-pleistocene societies could not always procure food in ways that they had been accustomed to for several thousand years. Some species of animals which had been hunted in large numbers, as for instance reindeer, were now scarce. The precise impact of these changes on different ecological zones is somewhat unclear. But the broad contours of these changes can be recognized.

A large proportion of Earth's water, which had been locked up in the form of ice, was now released with melting of ice due to warmer temperatures. This led to a rise in ocean and sea levels. On the one hand many coastal areas were submerged, as were low-lying areas. On the other hand areas which had been completely covered by ice-sheets now became habitable. Frozen rivers and streams melted and could be exploited. This is reflected in the great diversity of sea food and river fish consumed at the beginning of postglacial times.

In the temperate zones and tropical areas wetter conditions prevailed. Higher water levels combined with warmer climate increased the level of humidity in these areas. Many of the forests saw dense growth and several areas which had earlier been dry became open grasslands.

Although climatic changes had a profound impact on patterns of subsistence, we should not overemphasize their importance. It should be remembered that throughout the upper paleolithic, humans had to constantly adapt to rapid changes in the environment. As the last ice age progressed there had been a steady fall in temperatures till 20,000 years ago. Following a phase of severe cold, deglaciation had started almost immediately. Human societies had learnt to cope with such shifts in the environment. Moreover, human society during the upper paleolithic was sufficiently evolved to be able to respond to such changes.

The post-glacial epoch began 12,000 years ago (or 12,000 BP: 'BP' stands for 'before present' and is reckoned from 1950 AD. Thus 12,000 BP means 12,000 years before 1950, which could also be written as 10,150 BC. Most of the dates in this chapter are 'BP'). After 12,000 BP the brilliant upper paleolithic cultures of Europe collapsed. The most outstanding of these cultures, the Magdaenian, disappeared. For a long time after that nothing comparable to the achievements of the Magdaenian culture is to be found. Obviously the new environment could not sustain the Magdaenian economy. The successful adaptation of the Magdaenians was seriously upset by the transformation which had taken place in the environment.

In most parts of Europe hunting and food gathering economy continued at the beginning of the post-pleistocene epoch. These early post-glacial cultures seem inferior as compared to the Magdaenian. For a long time prehistorians saw this essentially as a period of all-round decline. They used the term 'mesolithic' (middle stone age) for European cultures of this period. *The term mesolithic was used specifically for the hunting and food gathering cultures of Europe in early postglacial times.* It was assumed that climatic changes had caused a reversal in Europe. While West Asia advanced towards agriculture, the Europeans continued with a primitive paleolithic way of life. The mesolithic was supposed to have come to an end with the spread of food-production to the continent. The use of the term is itself somewhat

controversial. Prehistorians have not been able to decide whether neolithic (new stone age) represented a complete break with the paleolithic or whether there was a gradual transition from paleolithic to neolithic, the mesolithic being an intermediate stage between the two. Moreover, in the context of Europe some scholars have regarded the mesolithic as a phase of decline while for others it was an attempt to adapt to the post-pleistocene environment by modifying the hunting and food gathering economy.

It is true that several parts of Europe stagnated or went into decline after c. 12,000 BP. However recent research has shown that some exciting developments were taking place in a few areas. This research has given a new meaning to the term mesolithic. Though the mainstay of the mesolithic remained hunting and food gathering, there were substantial innovations in the adaptive strategy. Much of the evidence for this new picture of the European mesolithic comes from Scandinavia and North Europe.

The mesolithic cultures of Scandinavia attempted to realize the full potential of hunting and food gathering. In these cultures a wide range of animals was hunted intensively. New tools and techniques were utilized to hunt more efficiently. Sea food came to occupy a central place in the economy. This became possible through exploiting the Baltic sea coast which was hitherto frozen. The Scandinavian ice-sheet covered much of North Europe in the last ice age. With warmer temperatures the ice-sheet retreated and the Baltic region, as well as the North European coastline, became accessible. The rich marine life of this region sustained Scandinavian mesolithic hunters. Different types of fish (of which salmon became a great favourite) and sea mammals (dolphins, seals and whales) were eaten. A rich assortment of land animals too were included in the diet. On the whole, mesolithic diet was increasingly diversified. A number of fishing hooks, nets and harpoons have been discovered at the mesolithic sites. The manufacture of very small and highly effective stone pieces (called 'microliths') became common. These microliths, with their sharp points

or edges, were used to make extremely lethal hunting tools. Mesolithic hunters regularly used bows and arrows. Canoes were made for navigation. These were dug out of tree-logs. Dogs had been domesticated for hunting.

The development of the mesolithic in North Europe can be divided into three main periods; Maglemose (9500 to 7700 BP); Kongemose (7700 to 6600 BP); and Ertebolle (6600 to 5200 BP). Sweden, Denmark and other parts of southern Scandinavia were the major centres of the mesolithic cultures. Mesolithic sites in southern Scandinavia show a high density of population. The population is fairly large in relation to the size of the respective territories. Hunters seem to have congregated in large numbers at certain favoured locations. They exploited these locations over a prolonged duration. This gave rise to a more sedentary lifestyle, something that is not common among hunter-gatherers. The mesolithic hunter-gatherers were in the process of settling down. This is very different from the usual pattern of hunter-gatherer adaptation. Hunter-gatherers are constantly on the move and live in small groups. In the transition from the Maglemose to the Kongemose and then the Ertebolle periods, Scandinavian mesolithic communities grew extraordinarily large. They lived in densely populated settlements.

This has been called a 'complex' hunting society. Social groups were larger in size. The environment was exploited intensively, particularly through fishing. Relationships of cooperation and exchange were established with other groups. Some goods (like specialized tools, ornaments and seashells) were also exchanged. By the Ertebolle period there is evidence of exchange with some farming communities as well. This is reflected in pottery discovered at mesolithic sites. In the words of T. Douglas Price we can now see the mesolithic as an age of 'innovation, interaction and successful adaptation among the early post-glacial hunter-gatherers of northern Europe'. This created conditions for the introduction of agriculture in these parts of Europe

between 6000 and 5000 BC.

The mesolithic economy was essentially an extension of paleolithic hunting and gathering. It was marked by intensive collection of plants. The mesolithic saw the beginnings of sedentism. Relationships of exchange between groups intensified. There is sufficient evidence to indicate an overall growth in population as well as increased density (more persons per square kilometre) in certain areas. As we have seen, these features can be discerned in the European mesolithic. These new elements in the hunter-gatherer way-of-life were quite pronounced in West Asia. It seems that in this region many of these new elements began to develop from the late pleistocene onwards. The adaptive strategy of hunter-gatherers of West Asia during the late pleistocene/ mesolithic led to the beginnings of food-production in this region.

West Asia had been cold and dry in the ice ages. Postglacial warming and humidity allowed grasslands to come up. The pleistocene environment in West Asia had been very harsh. Groups which inhabited this region could have sustained themselves by constantly moving about and gathering whatever edible wild plants were available. Gazelles were hunted in large numbers, almost to the exclusion of other animals. In these difficult conditions there might have been a greater willingness to experiment with some new types of food. At some point of time, towards the end of the pleistocene, wild cereal grasses were included in the diet.

From 12,000 BP onwards the paleolithic economy of West Asia was being steadily modified. New types of tools were made and the highly mobile lifestyle which was characteristic of the West Asian paleolithic was abandoned as food availability improved. Permanent dwellings began to make an appearance and there is a remarkable continuity of settlement during the post-pleistocene epoch at some West Asian sites. Evidence of such settlements has been found in Palestine/Israel, Syria and Jordan. These settlements, dating back to 12,000 BP, are referred to as the 'Natufian' culture (12,000 BP to 10,000 BP). In some of the earlier works on the

subject, Natufian is referred to as a mesolithic culture, because it was recognized essentially as a hunter-gatherer culture which had been modified to suit the post-glacial environment. A better understanding of the emergence of food production has enabled us to view the Natufian culture as having created the preconditions for agriculture. In West Asia a brief mesolithic age preceded the Natufian culture. The neolithic did not arise abruptly, but was the product of a long period of adjustment and experimentation. The Natufian culture marks the transition from paleolithic/ mesolithic to neolithic.

The Natufians subsisted on collection of wild cereals and nuts, and hunting of gazelles. They lived in circular huts. There is evidence to indicate that there were storage areas for plant foods. This points towards a more stable supply of food as well as a more settled existence. The most significant innovation in tool technology was the introduction of sickles by Natufians. These are the oldest sickles we know of. The sickles consist of two or three sharp-edged stone blades which are set in handles usually made from bone. The edges of the blades resembled goat-teeth. These were suitable for cutting wild cereal grasses. Cutting the hard stalks of these grasses resulted in a typical gloss or sheen on the blades which has been preserved on these implements. This gloss confirms that wild cereals were an important source of food for the Natufians.

In the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, prehistorians had very little information about early neolithic settlements. It was often assumed that food production began in those fertile areas (along the Nile in Egypt or between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Mesopotamia), which produced great civilizations. Till as late as the 1940s dates for neolithic settlements were highly unrealistic and frequently based on guesswork. From the 1950s a vast amount of new archeological evidence has become available. This evidence was based on excavations conducted in West Asia during the late forties and early fifties. These excavations coincided with a revolution in dating methods.

The single most important breakthrough was the application of radiocarbon dating to archeological finds. This new method made possible more precise dates. This method was a by-product of advances in atomic physics. What was revolutionary was its application to archeology.

Scientists had discovered that energy rays from outer space are constantly reaching the Earth's atmosphere. These are radioactive rays and they cause various reactions. As a result of chemical reactions involving certain gases (nitrogen, oxygen), a type of carbon is produced due to the impact of these energy rays from outer space (radioactive cosmic rays). This type of carbon (carbon-14) is somewhat different from the type of carbon which is most widely found on Earth (carbon-12). The two have different atomic weights (14 and 12 respectively), but their chemical properties are the same.

For our purpose what is important is that all living organisms absorb carbon. Since carbon-12 is the most widespread this is the type of carbon which is absorbed in large quantities. But there are also very small quantities of carbon-14 in the atmosphere. This carbon-14 too is absorbed. Interestingly there is a certain proportion between the two types of carbon. This proportion tends to remain constant due to an important feature of carbon-14. Carbon-14 is radioactive (it is also referred to as radiocarbon). Being radioactive it decays. This decay implies that it ceases to remain carbon. The decay ensures that the proportion between carbon-14 and carbon-12 remains constant even though carbon-14 is constantly being formed due to cosmic energy rays. While on the one hand carbon-14 atoms are being formed, on the other hand they are decaying (i.e. they no longer remain carbon). All living organisms which absorb carbon, imbibe carbon-14 and carbon-12 in the same proportion as is found in the atmosphere.

Plants and animals stop absorbing carbon when they are no longer alive. At the time of its death an organism would have had carbon-14 and carbon-12 in the same fixed proportion in which the two are found in the atmosphere, a proportion that can be estimated. Over a period of time the

carbon-12 content will remain what it was at the time of death, but carbon-14 will keep on decaying. A dead organism does not absorb any carbon, consequently no fresh carbon-14 will be added to replace that which has decayed.

An important discovery was that the decay of carbon-14 takes place at a regular rate. Every 5500 years half of a given amount of carbon-14 will have decayed in a dead organism. 5500 years after the death of an organism just half the original amount of carbon-14 (the amount which was present at the moment of death) would be left. After about 11,000 years only one-fourth the original amount would be left, and so on. We can estimate the time of death of the organism by measuring the carbon-14 present in it and comparing this carbon-14 with the carbon-12 present. The carbon-12 content will not have changed, while carbon-14 will have decayed. As the original proportion is known and the time-span over which carbon-14 decays is known (half a given amount every 5500 years), the period when the organism lived can be found out. Samples of wood or bone from a particular site can be used to date a culture by this method. Beyond a certain point (about 70,000 years) carbon-14, which in any case found in very small quantities, will have decayed to an extent that it becomes difficult to detect. Using the same principle other methods are now available for dating objects like fossils which are very old—several million years old. One important method is the potassium/ argon method, which is usually used to estimate the age of fossils. Potassium/ argon dating can be used together with geological data to compute the date when the fossilized organism lived.

The application of radiocarbon dating to archeology began in 1949. The pioneer in this field was Willard Libby, an American scientist, who won the Nobel Prize in 1960 for his contribution. This dating technique completely revised the history of the neolithic. As stated above, this method became available at a time when important archeological excavations were being made in West Asia. When radiocarbon dating was applied to remains from West Asian neolithic sites it was found that these sites were much older

than what had been thought earlier. This point will become clearer when we realize that written records from Egypt and Mesopotamia had been used by historians to date the beginnings of ancient civilizations in this region to 3000 BC (4950 BP). Working backwards from this date it had been estimated that about 1500 years would have elapsed between the beginnings of agriculture and the emergence of Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations. This meant that the earliest neolithic cultures were regarded as not older than 4500 BC (about 6500 BP). The revised dates based on carbon-14 revealed that some Palestinian neolithic sites were nearly 8200 years old. Subsequent research and more accurate application of radiocarbon dating now indicates that *the neolithic in West Asia began 10,500 BP*.

Nearly 150 early neolithic sites have been discovered in West Asia. These sites are located in a belt extending from the Dead Sea region in Palestine/Israel; the Jordan Valley; Syria, North Iraq; the Zagros mountains; and parts of North-West Iran. On the west this belt extends to southern Turkey. Apart from the fact that the date for the beginning of the neolithic have now been pushed back by almost 5000 years, it is clear that the shift to food-production *did not* initially take place in fertile river valleys but in grasslands, foothills and semi-arid areas which were located at a distance from the very fertile river zones.

The earliest neolithic settlements have been found in two areas of West Asia: Palestine/Israel and North Iraq. In Palestine the most important site is at Jericho. In North Iraq there are two important sites. These are Zawi Chemi Shanidar and Jarmo, both located at the foothills of the Zagros mountains. The excavations at Jericho were a major breakthrough for archeology. The Jericho neolithic dates back to 10,500 BP. Jericho exhibits continuity of settlement from the Natufian culture to various phases of the neolithic.

Jericho is situated near the Dead Sea. It is endowed with a natural spring. The water provided by the natural spring/ oasis at Jericho would have attracted the earliest settlers. Jericho gradually became a semipermanent settlement where

hunter-gatherers supplemented their food supply with a little cultivation. As they settled down they built round huts. These were followed later on by better built rectangular houses, some houses having courtyards. Although for a long time archeologists had equated the beginnings of pottery-making with the neolithic, the first two layers of settlement at Jericho contain no evidence of pottery. These two layers are referred to as 'pre-pottery neolithic A' (PPN A) and 'pre-pottery neolithic B' (PPN B). They were followed by neolithic cultures in which pottery was introduced. In PPN A and PPN B bowls and dishes were made out of soft limestone. They were cut out of stone and polished. The houses have large storage pits, obviously for storing seeds and nuts. A remarkable feature of the pre-pottery phase at Jericho is the construction of a massive defensive wall. The wall surrounded the settlement and is an amazing piece of architecture. It was made of large blocks of stone, and had a width of six and a half feet. On one side (west), where it is still well-preserved, the wall rose to a height of 12 feet. A large tower was built on the inside of the wall. The tower is 30 feet high, and has 22 steps leading to the top.

The introduction of pottery, after the PPN A and PPN B phases, represented a significant improvement. Pottery was a technological advance. Making pottery involves giving a permanent shape to clay by drawing water from it. The chemical nature of the clay is changed by bringing it in contact with fire. The clay is made into a particular shape and then baked, thereby removing the moisture. People had learnt to work with clay during the upper paleolithic (clay figurines etc.). In the mesolithic and Natufian cultures storage pits had been lined with clay. Perhaps more important than familiarity with clay, the making of pottery required controlled use of fire. Ovens had to be made where high temperatures could be constantly maintained for the time required to bake the clay. As we shall see, the ability to use fire in this way had important implications for the later transition to metal-using society. Baskets made by upper paleolithic and mesolithic cultures out of certain types

of plants might have suggested the shapes for the first pottery vessels. These vessels were used for storage of food and for cooking. Pottery shapes, the manner in which pottery is decorated and the technique employed (temperature at which the clay is baked; the type of clay used) is often very specific to a particular group. So much so that for archeologists pottery is a convenient method of dating and identifying cultures.

In the neighbourhood of Jericho, Abu Hureyra in Syria and Ain Ghazal in Jordan also provide evidence of the beginnings of agriculture. Abu Hureyra covers a large area—almost 28 acres. The people of Jericho, Abu Hureyra and Ain Ghazal devoted an increasing amount of time to cultivating cereals like wheat and barley. They also domesticated sheep and goats. Stone tools were adapted for cultivation. A large number of sickles have been found at these sites. There are also heavy stone apparatus for grinding cereals. The presence of arrow heads indicates the continuance of hunting during the early neolithic.

Although Jericho is perhaps the oldest neolithic settlement that we know of, it was the Zagros mountain foothills in North Iraq that provided the first archeological evidence for the beginnings of agriculture. Excavations conducted in the late 1940s resulted in the discovery of Jarmo in this area. The excavations were led by Robert Braidwood and his team. This was just the time when the radiocarbon dating method became available. With the help of carbon-14 dating Braidwood was able to show that the neolithic was much older than was earlier suspected. Further, that the transition to food production had taken place not in fertile river valleys but in the relatively marginal grasslands in North Iraq.

There is a story of professional jealousy connected with Jarmo. Shortly after the sensational find made by Braidwood, another archeologist, Kathleen Kenyon, published the results of her excavations at Jericho. These showed that Jericho was much older than Jarmo and that Palestine rather than North Iraq was the place where agriculture had first evolved. As

we have seen, there was also a continuity from the Natufian culture to the early neolithic in this area. Though Kenyon's dates were also based on the radiocarbon dating method, Braidwood was sceptical about her conclusions. The Jericho versus Jarmo dispute continued for several years. It is now accepted that Kenyon was right. Jericho is in fact much older (10,500 BP) than Jarmo (7000 BP).

Nevertheless, the Zagros mountain foothills remain crucial for reconstructing the early history of agriculture. Subsequent work in this area has brought to light older sites where we can see the shift to food production taking place. One such site is Zawi Chemi Shanidar which dates back to 11,000 BP. This was a settlement of hunter-gatherers who led a semipermanent existence. They specialized in the hunting of wild mountain goats and might have started herding sheep. Wild cereals were included in their diet. Evidence for regular food production in this area comes from AH Kosh. This neolithic settlement in North Iraq dates back to 10,000 BP. At AH Kosh, and later at Jarmo, the people subsisted increasingly on cultivation. Rectangular houses were built. These contain pits for storage. Stone tools were adapted for agriculture. Sickles and grinding stones have been found. It has been estimated that in Jarmo less than twenty percent of the food came from hunting and food gathering, so that this subsistence pattern had ceased to be an important part of the economy.

In Turkey (Anatolia) regular cultivation of plants might have begun in 9500 BP at Cayonu and somewhat later at Hacilar. The most significant early neolithic site in this region is Catal Huyuk (8000 BP). Catal Huyuk was a large neolithic settlement. It is spread over an area of 32 acres. The houses are built of sun-dried bricks. There are a number of shrines as well. Catal Huyuk can be described almost as a town. It traded in various types of stone raw materials and seashells. To the west of Anatolia one might mention another early neolithic settlement, Argissa-Maghula in Greece (8000 BP).

Between 7000 and 6000 BP agriculture became the mainstay of several communities in West Asia, South Europe

and North Africa. Unlike what was thought earlier, the Egyptian neolithic started relatively late. In the Nile Valley neolithic settlements began to develop c. 6500 BP. Two of the most well-known early neolithic settlements are Fayum and Merimde. The people of these settlements practised farming, but lived at a low level of subsistence. Tools and pottery are very simple. It has been suggested that there might have been several other neolithic settlements along the Nile and that agriculture might have begun in Egypt c. 7000 BP.

Now that a fairly reliable chronology of the early neolithic has been worked out, prehistorians have turned their attention to another problem. A lot of archeological evidence has accumulated to show *when* and *where* the neolithic began. Over the past few decades historians, sociologists and anthropologists have been more preoccupied with understanding *why* paleolithic adaptation was given up in favour of a different strategy. *The distinctive feature of the neolithic was food-production (farming; domestication of animals), in place of hunting and food gathering.*

Why was hunting and food gathering abandoned? This is a relevant question mainly for two reasons. Firstly, people do not easily give up a pattern of subsistence which they have been accustomed to for generations. Secondly, hunting and food gathering does not necessarily imply near-starvation conditions or inadequate food supply. Anthropological studies have shown that hunting and food gathering societies are quite capable of procuring sufficient diet and nutrition. It is wrong to assume that the transition from food gathering and hunting to food production was inevitable. After all many hunter-gatherer societies have managed to survive quite well down to the present time.

During the 1960s Richard Lee, an American anthropologist, investigated the subsistence pattern of a hunter-gatherer community living in South Africa. These were the Kung (the correct spelling is !Kung) Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert. They live in a marginal habitat which is sparsely endowed with plants. Anyone would think that procuring food in this area would keep the Kung fully occupied the

whole day. Lee's study, however, showed that this was not the case. The Kung were very well adapted to the environment. They subsisted on hunting and foraging. They spent an average of two hours per day to collect food. Their food supply was adequate and they got sufficient nourishment. In fact Lee found that their diet was more nutritious than that of some of the neighbouring farming communities. The Kung managed to survive periods of drought very well because they relied on a variety of plants. On the whole they were a healthy people, even though they continued to live on the basis of food gathering and hunting. Lee's research shattered the myth that hunter-gatherers invariably live on the verge of starvation and that they have to spend long hours to procure food.

Lee's conclusions, which have been reinforced by subsequent anthropological research on contemporary hunter-gatherers, has compelled prehistorians to rethink about the transition to the neolithic. If we stop thinking of hunting and food gathering as being inherently deficient, and regard it as one of the several possible adaptive strategies, then it is necessary to consider why humans switched from one strategy to another. Upper paleolithic hunting and food gathering was highly efficient. Moreover, whereas present-day hunter-gatherers have to live in marginal habitats (the most favourable areas having been taken over by agriculture), hunter-gatherers in the late pleistocene occupied regions with plentiful food supply.

The transition to food production was a complex phenomenon. It involved manipulating nature. Through human intervention some plants were made to grow intensively, while others were excluded. These plants were not just grown in their wild state but they were domesticated. Over a period of time some characteristics of chosen species of plants were altered. Characteristics which were found useful were adopted/ whereas unfavourable characteristics were discarded. One such example is the propagation of those varieties of wheat which did not have a brittle 'rachis'. Rachis is the part where the seed is attached

to the main stem of the plant. In the wild variety this tends to become brittle, i.e. it breaks very easily, as the plant matures. This enables the seeds of the wild plant to be dispersed easily for subsequent reproduction. However, this would have been a problem for cultivators since the seeds would have scattered when the plant was cut. If the plant was cut too early then it would contain moisture which would make storage difficult. Consequently such varieties were encouraged and developed in which the rachis did not break easily in the mature plant. Humans now intervened in helping the plant to reproduce, therefore a brittle rachis was no longer essential and could be dispensed with. In the case of animals too we find a similar process. Domesticating animals meant that some selected species were tamed and their wild traits were removed through selective breeding. In the case of both plants and animals domestication was a matter of choosing the appropriate species and then concentrating on them. Through observation and experimentation those species were selected which were amenable to domestication and which provided sufficient nourishment in relation to the amount of labour expended in growing/breeding them.

We must shed some simplistic notions about the origins of food production, as for example the notion that humans took to agriculture when they discovered the seed-plant relationship. Hunter-gatherers live in very close touch with nature. They have to observe plants and animals very carefully—after all their survival is dependent on this. They have a very good knowledge of what plant foods are available in which part of the year. They know where to look for a particular plant, the season it grows in and the environment which is favourable for its growth. Late pleistocene humans would have accumulated a great deal of information about how plants grow. Though they might have possessed this knowledge they did not necessarily put it to immediate use. It is only at the beginning of the postglacial epoch that this knowledge began to be used to manipulate nature.

Since the transition to food production coincided with the end of the ice ages, a number of prehistorians have regarded environmental changes as a significant factor in the transition. V. Gordon Childe, one of the greatest prehistorians of this century, put forth the view that in the post-pleistocene epoch there was a general process of 'desiccation' (drying up). Due to this desiccation those zones which had been rich in plants and animals could no longer support hunter-gatherers. People began to move to areas where there was some source of water. Animals too were forced to move to these areas in search of food. This resulted in a very close relationship between humans and animals, some of which were subsequently domesticated. Species of plants like wild cereal grasses began to be cultivated to supplement the food supply. This led to agriculture.

It should be noted that Childe's theory was based on evidence which was available during the first half of the century, when most of his major works were written. As we have already noted, it was only during the 1950s that more precise information on the early neolithic became available. This showed that there was no evidence of desiccation in areas where early neolithic cultures had developed. Robert Braidwood during the course of his excavations in North Iraq tried to see whether there was any evidence of desiccation in the post-pleistocene epoch. He found no such evidence and therefore ruled out the possibility of drastic environmental changes having led to the origins of agriculture.

Braidwood sought to explain the shift to food production in cultural terms. He argued that agriculture developed in certain areas—'nuclear zones'—where potentially cultivable plants (wild cereal grasses, lentils etc.) and animals which could be domesticated (sheep, goats) were available in abundance. People living in the nuclear zones were already familiar with these plants and animals and had been exploiting them for a long time. As they acquired more knowledge of the habitat they learnt to manipulate certain species of animals and plants. This was a cultural process

and it was only a matter of time before the shift to agriculture took place in these nuclear zones.

It was from 1968 onwards, especially after the work of anthropologists like Lee, that more elaborate theories about the origins of agriculture were put forth. By this time a large amount of archeological evidence was available from different parts of the world. The post-pleistocene environment was also better understood. It was clear that there was no drying-up in this period. Though there were changes in the environment, they effected different regions in specific ways.

Environmental change as a factor was not completely abandoned, but the focus shifted to factors like population growth and the social consequences of sedentism.

Lewis Binford suggested that demographic factors were responsible for the shift to agriculture. His hypothesis is that the pattern of adaptation would change if the equilibrium between population and environment is disturbed. As long as the equilibrium is maintained people would continue to pursue the adaptive strategy which they were accustomed to. The equilibrium would be disturbed either due to the drastic environmental changes or due to demographic changes. As there is no evidence of a drastic change in the environment of West Asia at the end of the ice ages, Binford has focused on population growth as the main factor responsible for the origin of farming. This population growth occurred in those areas where favourable conditions at the end of the pleistocene encouraged hunter-gatherers to settle down for relatively long periods of time. Sedentism (lack of mobility) triggered population growth. As long as hunter-gatherers were constantly on the move they tried to keep the birth of offspring in check. Too many infants can hamper movement from one place to another as it is difficult to carry them, particularly if one has to simultaneously forage for food. With sedentism it was not necessary to have a long gap between the birth of one child and another. Thus there was rapid increase in population during the early post-pleistocene.

Binford differentiates between two types of habitats:

optimal and marginal. Even in the paleolithic age, some areas had a larger population than others. The optimal habitats were the main centres of population growth. These had a greater 'carrying capacity', i.e. these were areas which had sufficient resources to support a large population. This induced people to inhabit the optimal habitats as they were assured of adequate food supply. But sedentism caused population to grow to a point where it exceeded the carrying capacity of the area. Once the equilibrium was disturbed, some groups moved away from the optimal habitats to neighbouring marginal habitats (Binford refers to these groups as 'daughter groups'). These were areas which were located at the margins of the optimal habitats. The marginal habitats did not have a very high carrying capacity. Their resources were not adequate for supporting a large population. Consequently the communities which inhabited those areas continued with a more mobile lifestyle. In the absence of sedentism, population growth was kept in check and equilibrium was maintained.

Population growth in the optimal habitats created problems for the marginal habitats. As daughter groups from the centres of population growth moved to the margins, the balance in these zones was upset. The pressure felt by the people living in marginal habitats forced them to look for new ways to subsist. It was this situation that led to the shift to agriculture in the marginal zones rather than in the optimal habitats.

Though Binford regards population growth as the prime mover of change, he has not completely discarded environmental factors. He has suggested that the post-pleistocene rise in sea levels created a favourable coastal habitat for sedentary populations. These coastal habitats provided opportunities for augmenting food supply through fishing and including a wide range of marine animals in the diet. These became centres of rapid population growth while marginal zones lay in the interior.

During the late 60s another scholar, Kent Flannery, put forth the view that there were other ways in which the

equilibrium could have been disturbed. He stated that the shift to agriculture did not denote a drastic change. The stability of the hunting-gathering economy was gradually disturbed due to the fact that during the upper paleolithic, people living in some areas (especially marginal areas like West Asia) began paying more attention to certain types of plants. It was found that these were species whose yield could be increased considerably. Flannery suggested that there might have been accidental changes (mutations) in some of the species which were collected in their wild form. These mutations brought about changes in the structure of these species, accelerating their growth at the expense of other species. People starting paying more heed to these species, even encouraging their growth, so that eventually other species were pushed out. In the case of West Asia, wheat and barley became the favoured plants. Flannery's theory was based on evidence of the origins of agriculture in the American continent. In mesoamerica ('middle America', or the region between North Mexico and Panama), early agriculture was based on maize cultivation. Here the natural evolution and spread of mutant forms of maize—types which began to grow in abundance naturally—had prompted people to collect them to a greater extent thereby neglecting other species. As dependence on these species grew, the next stage was to intervene in nature by nurturing the mutant forms.

According to Flannery these developments were preceded by a shift from a 'narrow spectrum' to a 'broad spectrum' economy. A broad spectrum economy is one in which a wide range of animals and plants, procured in diverse ways, are included in the diet. In the upper paleolithic there was already a broadening of the subsistence base. Fish, crabs, snails, turtles and possibly wild cereals were becoming part of the diet in some areas. This 'broad spectrum revolution' as Flannery calls it, took place in marginal areas like West Asia. In marginal areas it was necessary to tap all possible sources of nutrition. People living in these habitats were more open to experimentation.

There was also need to encourage the growth of certain species. For instance, this could have been achieved by weeding out competing species.

More recently Mark Cohen has restated the case for population being the major factor underlying the origin of agriculture. His argument is somewhat different from that of Binford. In Binford's model demographic changes occurred at the beginning of the post-pleistocene epoch. Cohen sees population growth as a long-term process. There had been a continuous rise in population during the paleolithic age. As the population increased, humans began occupying all those regions which could sustain the hunting and food gathering economy. By the end of the ice ages most areas which were suited to the paleolithic hunting and foraging economy had already been inhabited by the expanding population. Once it became increasingly difficult to have access to such areas, it was necessary to experiment with new ways of procuring food. Agriculture was a response to population pressure. Cohen points out that the advantage of agriculture is that it allows greater density of population. This new adaptive strategy created possibilities for producing *more edible calories per unit of land*.

Cohen has questioned some of the earlier population estimates for the beginning of the holocene. The consensus among scholars who have worked on the subject has been that the population at the end of the paleolithic, and during the mesolithic, ranged from 3 to 5 million. Cohen's figure is much higher—15 million. According to him only agriculture could support such a large population. Hunting and foraging implies a low density of population. The paleolithic economy permitted a density of 0.1 persons per sq. km. The early neolithic density was 1 to 2 persons per sq. km. In other words with the transition to agriculture at least ten times more persons per unit of land could be maintained than what could be achieved by hunting and gathering.

Barbara Bender has been very critical of theories which

centre around population growth. She has argued that increase in population cannot by itself be regarded as a

prime mover. After all, population growth does not take place in isolation. It is linked to a number of factors. The manner in which a society is organized; its subsistence pattern; the level of technology; integration with the environment; and world-view are some of the factors which determine population levels. As Bender puts it, 'Demography is the result of a hierarchy of causes, of which the most important are the relations of production'. What is crucial is how society produces what it requires and how this production process is controlled. All this affects the demographic structure. We should therefore start by looking at social relations as a whole, rather than isolating population or environment as causes of change. Adaptive strategies change because social relations undergo change.

Even though the debate on this issue remains inconclusive, it has shed light on several aspects of the problem. We can now see the origin of agriculture as being a process, rather than an event. The different theories that have been advanced do not necessarily account for the beginnings of food production in mutually exclusive terms. While the stress in some theories is on environment, it is not as though environmental change as a catalyst is completely ignored. We have noted that this is the case with Binford's hypothesis.

Much before the end of the paleolithic, hunter-gatherers had begun intervening in nature by showing more interest in some species of plants. The growth of those plants which were considered useful could have been fostered. It is even possible that some plants were cultivated for their poison (for arrows) or for extracting colours (for paintings). A small plot might have been set aside for cultivating certain wild species. This kind of cultivation of plants on tiny plots led to horticulture (as different from agriculture, or field cultivation). As we have already noted some species could have been favoured at the cost of others by foragers. This was done by weeding out plants that were not required.

At the beginning of the post-glacial epoch people inhabiting the marginal areas of West Asia concentrated on two types of cereals: wheat and barley. Wild cereals were

already included in their diet at the end of the pleistocene. Soon domesticated species were being cultivated. Genetic accidents gave rise to these new species. A variety of wheat called 'emmer wheat' and a variety of barley called 'two-row barley' became the basis of agriculture in this region. Emmer wheat and two-row barley are different from their wild ancestors. Emmer wheat remained the most important variety of wheat during the early neolithic. In some parts of Central Europe another variety of wheat was cultivated. This variety is known as 'einkorn wheat'.

The domestication of animals was a somewhat more complicated affair. Instead of killing animals directly for food, as happens in a hunting economy, some species were reared for their produce: milk, eggs, wool and meat. Animals were selectively bred so that they could provide surplus milk and eggs. In the case of sheep, human intervention made them grow wool on their body. Wild ancestors of sheep did not grow wool. As for animals which were reared for meat, these were not killed immediately but allowed to grow to a particular age before they were slaughtered.

Domestication of animals meant that they were made to shed their wild characteristics {reduction of horn size, teeth, etc.}. The first stage was a period of loose interaction between humans and those animals which could be tamed easily. This was followed by a period of rigid captivity of chosen species. The animals were not allowed to interbreed with the wild types and remained in close contact with humans. Once they had shed their wild traits, they were crossbred so as to improve certain features. The objective was to enhance yield of milk, eggs, wool or meat—depending upon the product for which a species had been domesticated.

There is evidence to suggest that during the upper paleolithic some animals had been domesticated. The dog was the first animal to be domesticated. Domesticated dogs assisted upper paleolithic humans with hunting. Reindeers were also domesticated. These would be released among wild reindeer to distract them to facilitate hunting of the wild reindeer.

Though domestication of animals dates back to the upper paleolithic, it was only during the neolithic that domestication acquired a new significance. Upper paleolithic groups might have had a few domesticated animals which were primarily used to assist in hunting. During the neolithic, relatively larger numbers of animals could be maintained. Sedentism provided the necessary conditions for rearing animals in captivity over long periods. It has also been pointed out that the mental attitude towards animals in a hunting society is very different from that of food producing societies. Hunter-gatherers are not emotionally attached to animals, so that a hunting and food gathering society is not very conducive to domestication of animals on a large scale.

It was only during the early neolithic that domestication of animals occurred on a sufficiently large scale to be significant for the economy. During the early neolithic sheep and goats were the two main animals that were domesticated. Sheep were domesticated in West Asia around 10,500 BP. Towards the end of the pleistocene hunter-gatherers in some parts of West Asia, e.g. in the Zagros mountains, where mountain goats were an important source of food, might have become familiar with the technique of herding sheep and goats in loose enclosures. Younger animals (and females) were not killed but allowed to grow/reproduce. By sparing younger sheep and goats the food supply was made more stable. With sedentism more long-term herding became possible. Apart from sheep and goats, pigs were also domesticated. The domestication of cattle came somewhat later as wild cattle were more difficult to tame.

It is incorrect to assume that hunting and food gathering were abandoned as soon as plants and animals were domesticated and the shift to agriculture had taken place. Until people were sure that agriculture was a viable alternative to hunting and foraging, they would not have completely given up their earlier lifestyle. Even after the cultivation of plants had been introduced a sort of mixed economy prevailed for a while, i.e. food production, hunting.

foraging. The proportions in which the three were combined varied from region to region. However over a period of time certain plants (cereals like wheat and barley) responded very well to the effort that was put into cultivating them. Concentrating on a few chosen plants meant that other plants were neglected and no longer grew in abundance. Foraging was no longer available as an option because wild plants had been excluded. Once this option was closed it was even more necessary that the success of agriculture be ensured. Sedentism helped in this process by bringing several groups in close contact with each other on a semipermanent or permanent basis and promoting cooperation among these groups, thereby reinforcing food production.

Early neolithic society differed in many ways from the paleolithic. Even in the upper paleolithic hunter-gatherer bands no longer lived in complete isolation. They had formed relationships with other bands with whom they cooperated for hunting. In the marginal habitats some amount of cooperation would have been indispensable. There was also some exchange between groups, especially exchange of articles required for ritual. Some rituals too were performed in common. Yet hunter-gatherer groups did not come together for extended periods of time. When social groups live together in large numbers for a long time they need some mechanism to resolve disputes. Upper paleolithic hunter-gatherers did not have such a mechanism. If there was a dispute it was easier to move away. This was possible because hunter-gatherers were relatively more mobile and not attached to a particular territory. It is only as people started settling down on a semipermanent basis in the post-pleistocene that they developed mechanisms for resolving conflicts. As Barbara Bender notes, the problem of sedentism is not so much a question of population as of finding solutions to problems of living together. This gave rise to structures of authority as well as rules for social interaction.

To begin with, authority was linked to the performance of rituals. This authority, and the status that went with it, would not have meant much in terms of access to food, but

it would have provided an opportunity to have access to objects like ornaments or some articles connected with ritual. This status was further reinforced if relationships of exchange and cooperation with other groups could be worked out successfully by persons enjoying some authority in the group. Cooperation among groups which had settled down at one place, and the emergence of some persons who had authority, speeded up the transition to agriculture. In fact these social changes might themselves have been the catalyst for the shift to food production.

The archeological evidence from several early neolithic sites in West Asia points towards an efficient social organization. There was a great deal of exchange involving sea shells and obsidian. Obsidian was a type of stone that was much sought after since it was easy to work on for the purpose of making tools. Catal Huyuk in Anatolia was involved in the exchange of obsidian on a fairly large scale. This was helped by the emergence of persons who could organize the exchange. The graves at Catal Huyuk show that some persons were buried along with objects which could be regarded as superior. Other graves do not have such objects. It is in this context that we must place the growth of Catal Huyuk into a large neolithic settlement.

The evidence from Jericho is even more significant. We have already noted the large defensive wall at this site, which could only have been constructed if the labour of the people living at Jericho was pooled together. This called for some organizing skills to plan and coordinate this activity. Further, the neolithic settlement of Jericho was quite densely populated from an early date. As population grew, a large area around the oasis of Jericho came under cultivation. Many fields were located at some distance from the oasis. Channels were dug to carry water to the outlying fields. Kathleen Kenyon has pointed out that there must have been some social mechanism to make arrangements for planning the channels and distributing water equitably.

On the whole control over the means of production as well the produce remained collective in the early neolithic.

Bands were now replaced by clans as the main social unit. These were extended families which comprised members who had kinship ties (i.e. were related by blood; had a common ancestry). Relationships were more strictly defined and rules for mating/marriage were specified. The clan evolved into an exogamous unit: one had to marry outside one's own unit. Marriage within the clan was prohibited as those who were members of the clan were related by blood. The exogamous clan served a useful purpose in developing cooperation between different groups. Cooperation between groups could become more stable if there were relationships of exchange among them. Part of this exchange was of the nature of gifts. Gifts were given to and received from groups with which cooperation was desired. Apart from objects, the exchange of marriage partners too became a way of strengthening ties of cooperation. Marriage partners were given (gifted) by exogamous clans to other exogamous clans. Descent within the clan was determined on the mother's side (matrilineal clan). During the early neolithic women played a decisive role in developing agriculture. We have already noted that women were intimately connected with gathering of plants in the paleolithic. This placed them in a central position when the cultivation of plants began.

Religious beliefs and rituals too became more elaborate. In many of the early neolithic settlements clay and plaster figures have been found. A large number of these figures depict women. At times pregnant women are shown. The figurines of women were connected with rituals which were meant to promote fertility (of women as well as the soil). These developed into mother-goddess cults which are so characteristic of agrarian societies. At Jericho, apart from figurines of women, an interesting discovery is that of skulls which were carefully placed in dwelling places. These skulls have a coating of clay and their eye sockets are inset with shells. These skulls served some ritualistic purpose. Kenyon says that they were part of a 'cult of skulls'. This cult could be some form of ancestor worship. At Catal Huyuk there is clear evidence of the prevalence of a bull cult. Bulls were

worshipped and/or sacrificed and a large number of shrines of this cult have survived. This cult too was connected with fertility rituals. Anatolia and the Eastern Mediterranean region remained the home of bull cults for a long time.

Gordon Childe has referred to the shift to agriculture as the 'neolithic revolution'. Some prehistorians have subsequently questioned the use of the term 'revolution' and pointed out that what occurred was more of an evolution spread over a long period, rather than a revolution. We have already seen that the origin of agriculture cannot be regarded as an event which took place at a specific moment. It is true therefore that we must rule out the possibility of a *sudden* shift to agriculture. But then this 'suddenness' was not what Gordon Childe had in mind. His concept of neolithic revolution was that this was a revolution in the sense that it marked a major qualitative change—not just a quantitative change. Once human societies adopted agriculture they created conditions for developing a more complex society. They could produce a surplus which eventually led to the beginnings of civilization. For several hundred thousand years during the paleolithic, hunting and food gathering had been the basis of the economy. Agriculture is of very recent origin. Nevertheless, it should be underlined that once agriculture had become an alternative adaptive strategy it completely replaced hunting and foraging within a few thousand years. Contemporary hunter-gatherers are invariably confined to marginal areas. Agriculture has completely revolutionized the lifestyle of humans.

Chapter Four

THE BEGINNINGS OF CIVILIZATION

AND BRONZE AGE MESOPOTAMIA

THE transition from neolithic to bronze age civilization first took place in Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia broadly corresponds to present day Iraq. Mesopotamia produced the earliest known bronze age civilization—the *Sumerian* civilization. For this reason Mesopotamia has a special significance in a discussion on the transition from neolithic to bronze age. Moreover, the archaeological record pertaining to this transition in Mesopotamia is very rich. The archaeological remains in this region are comprehensive enough to enable a step by step reconstruction of the evolution from early food producing society to metal using society.

It is necessary to begin by outlining the specific geographical features of Mesopotamia. The historical evolution of Mesopotamia can be properly understood only with reference to these features. Two major rivers flow through the country. These are the Euphrates (Purattu) and the Tigris (Idiqlat). These rivers flow from north to south and discharge their waters into the Persian Gulf. Mesopotamia can broadly be divided into two distinct regions: north and south. These two regions have very different environments. Northern Mesopotamia extends from the Zagros mountains to the middle Tigris. On the west this region is bound by the Syrian desert. During ancient times northern Mesopotamia was frequently referred to as Assyria.

Southern Mesopotamia is the region lying roughly between the middle Tigris and the Persian Gulf. This region is nearly 400 km long and over 100 km across. In the east it is bordered by Iran. In the west there is an unending stretch of desert which merges with the Arabian desert. The land is absolutely flat with no stones or rocks. We can get some idea of the flatness of the land from the fact that even at a distance of 400 km from the Persian Gulf (i.e. the point where southern Mesopotamia begins), the land is just 20 metres above sea level. This means that the region exhibits virtually no slope in the direction of the sea. Southern Mesopotamia is an arid zone surrounded by desert. Rainfall is scanty. However, the Euphrates and the Tigris provide possibilities for cultivation, and therefore for habitation, in this region.

At the beginning of the historical period the southernmost part of Mesopotamia was known as Sumeria. The area lying between Sumeria and northern Mesopotamia was called Akkad. In fact Sumeria and Akkad together constituted southern Mesopotamia. From around 2000 BC onwards Sumeria and Akkad are often referred to as Babylonia. To sum up: Mesopotamia has two distinct geographical zones—northern Mesopotamia (or Assyria) and southern Mesopotamia. In ancient times southern Mesopotamia was subdivided into two parts. These were Akkad and Sumeria. From c. 2000 onwards Akkad and Sumeria together are referred to as Babylonia, since Babylon became the political centre of a major empire in southern Mesopotamia.

As we have already seen in the previous chapter, some of the earliest neolithic settlements were located in northern Mesopotamia. The Zagros mountain foothills have been identified as part of the West Asian belt in which evidence of the beginnings of food production has been found. The beginnings of agriculture in the Zagros mountain foothills goes back to nearly 10,000 BP (Ali Kosh). Later, the important

neolithic settlement of Jarmo came up in this area. Northern Mesopotamia has adequate rainfall to sustain cultivation of crops without having to rely on irrigation. Winter rainfall supports cultivation of crops like wheat and barley as well as various kinds of grasses. Wheat and barley can be grown in the Zagros mountains wherever 200 mm of rainfall is available.

Between 8000 BC and 6000 BC a number of neolithic villages came up in northern Mesopotamia. Jarmo has already been referred to.. The village of Jarmo had multiroomed houses. The houses had mud walls and contained two or more rooms. They also had ovens and storage basins. Food production was a major activity. Several sickles have been found at the site. The people of Jarmo cultivated wheat and barley. Umm Dabaghiyah was another important early neolithic settlement in northern Mesopotamia.

By c. 6000 BC food production had become widespread throughout northern Mesopotamia, leading to the emergence of three successive neolithic cultures: Hassuna (6000-5500 BC); Samarra (5500-5000 BC); and Halaf (5500-4500 BC). All these three cultures were products of the northern Mesopotamian environment. Cultivation was mainly based on winter rainfall. With the development of these neolithic cultures, food production replaced food gathering and hunting in Mesopotamia. Another feature of these cultures was the manufacture of beautiful handmade pottery.

The Hassuna culture derives its name from the site of Tell Hassuna where it was first identified. A large number of settlements belonging to this culture have been discovered. These are spread over an extensive area in northern Mesopotamia. Hassuna neolithic villages had houses consisting of several rooms. All houses had structures for storing grain. Sickles with stone blades were widely used. Other types of stone tools discovered at Hassuna sites include heavy javelins. Hassuna pottery was painted and decorated with various geometric designs. There is some evidence of hunting, but by now this was a secondary activity. It has been estimated that many Hassuna villages

had as many as four hundred inhabitants. This is an indication of the successful adaptation of Hassuna farmers.

The Hassuna culture was followed by the Samarra neolithic culture. By the time this culture developed, people of northern Mesopotamia were beginning to settle along the middle Tigris, i.e. on the margins of southern Mesopotamia. Winter rainfall is relatively scarce in this area. Therefore the Samarrans had to rely on some amount of artificial irrigation. Evidence of primitive irrigation has been found at Samarra sites like Tell es-Sawwan and Choga Mami. At Choga Mami rudimentary canals were dug to carry the water to fields. The population of this settlement might have been nearly 1000 persons. The village was protected by a ditch. All these features point towards a more complex social organization. The Samarrans cultivated wheat and barley. Linseed was also grown.

The Halafian culture represents the most advanced stage in the development of the neolithic in northern Mesopotamia. This culture, which lasted for nearly a thousand years (c. 5500-4500), was first identified at Tell Halaf. Tiny beads of metallic copper have been found at some Halafian sites. These were made of copper found on the surface (i.e. the metal was not procured by mining). However, various types of stone (flint, obsidian etc.) continued to be the main material for making tools.

The Halafians produced pottery of outstanding quality. This pottery was technically and artistically of a very high standard. Georges Roux considers Halafian pottery to be 'the most beautiful ever used in Mesopotamia'. Other scholars too regard the pottery of this culture as the most attractive of all the handmade pottery produced in ancient Mesopotamia. The pottery was painted and slightly glazed. It was fired at a very high temperature which gave it a characteristic shine. Halafian pottery has been found at a large number of sites spread over a very wide area extending from the Zagros mountains in the east to Syria in the west. It is quite likely that settlements in this area had established trade and exchange relationships.

The process of settlement in southern Mesopotamia began a little before 5000 BC. It has been suggested that the region was probably too swampy for settlement prior to c. 5300 BC. From about 5300 BC onwards efforts were made to exploit the harsh environment of southern Mesopotamia. Probably some Samarran farmers settled in central Mesopotamia may have taken the initiative to occupy the delta region. As we have noted, the Samarrans had already attempted a primitive form of irrigation.

It needs to be stressed that the settlement of southern Mesopotamia could only have been undertaken by simultaneously developing artificial irrigation. There is hardly any rainfall in this region, but the soil is extremely fertile provided it can be irrigated. The earliest settlements were along the banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates. Subsequently, canals were dug to carry the water to fields located at a distance from the rivers. The bed of the Euphrates is higher than that of the Tigris. In the delta region this causes small streams to flow out from the Euphrates in the direction of the Tigris. These can be channelled in to fields by digging canals. The Tigris requires the construction of barrages for diverting water for the purpose of irrigation. Eventually a network of canals and barrages came up in southern Mesopotamia which allowed the full potential of the region to be realized, making it the centre of the earliest bronze age civilization.

With the settlement of southern Mesopotamia three neolithic cultures developed in the region. The earliest was the al-Ubaid culture (5000 to 4000 BC). This was followed by one of the most prominent cultures of West Asia—the Uruk culture (4000 to 3200 BC). Finally, the Jamdat Nasr culture (3200 to 3000 BC) culminated in the emergence of Sumerian civilization.

The al-Ubaid culture marked the first major attempt to adapt to the environment of southern Mesopotamia. Initially advantage was taken of natural channels to irrigate crops. Wheat and barley were grown. Goats and sheep were also reared. Fish, procured from the Euphrates and the Tigris, as

well as from marshes in Lower Mesopotamia, was an important source of food. The nutritious date palm which grows in abundance in the area would have supplemented the diet.

The al-Ubaid culture provides evidence of the use of metal, although on a small scale. Copper, which is a relatively easy metal to work with, was utilized for making copper tools. Gordon Childe has suggested that at this stage a few metallurgists would have been going from village to village for the purpose of making metal objects. It should be noted that working with metal requires a certain level of skill. In other words, the production of metal requires specialists who have knowledge and experience of metallurgy. The technology involved in extracting and processing metal is a specialized job which, normally, cannot be undertaken by someone who does not have the requisite skill. Production of metal objects involves a much more complex process than making stone tools or pottery. The first steps might have been taken by potters with their skill in using ovens. The Halafian potters had been firing their pottery in kilns in which temperatures as high as 1200 °C could be attained. This is the temperature at which copper melts. It could not have been very difficult to transfer this technical know-how to copper. Nevertheless, casting of copper came somewhat later. From casting copper the next step was to produce bronze. Copper is too soft a metal for making effective tools and weapons. Metallurgists discovered that by adding small quantities of tin to copper a harder material was obtained. This led to the making of bronze, which is an alloy of copper and tin. Bronze came into use only towards the end of the neolithic.

Some people would have had to devote considerable time for specialized metal production. However, this kind of specialization becomes possible only in a situation where a community can produce enough food to provide subsistence to specialists. The producers of copper objects could then exchange their products for food. Initially the use of metal would have been very limited and these specialists,

or 'roving specialists' as Gordon Childe calls them, would have moved from place to place making available their services. Moreover, during the al-Ubaid period a given community might not yet have been in a position to produce enough food to support a group of metallurgists on a permanent basis. Consequently several villages shared the services of these roving copperworkers who made copper implements in exchange for food.

Although the Halafians had initiated the use of clay for making bricks, it was in the al-Ubaid culture that bricks were used extensively for constructing dwelling places. This was partly due to the fact that hardly any stone was available in southern Mesopotamia. These bricks were formed by putting clay (mixed with straw etc.) in wooden frames. The bricks were initially sun-dried and not baked. The people of the al-Ubaid culture continued with older techniques of making pottery. The pottery was shaped by hand (i.e. it was not yet wheel-turned).

It needs to be emphasized once again that the development of southern Mesopotamia was dependent on the development of artificial irrigation. However, irrigation is not merely a matter of developing technology. Even very simple types of irrigation in this region require that a group of people should pool together their resources. Planning and coordination are necessary. People have to cooperate with each other over a long period of time, during the course of a season as well as from one season to another. All this cooperation, planning and coordination presupposes a higher form of social organization. Graham Clarke, writing about southern Mesopotamia, states: 'Its full possibilities could only be realized by civilized societies, i.e. societies with political as distinct from merely familial or social institutions, institutions which ensured the discharge by individuals of increasingly specialized roles.'

It is now generally recognized that temples played a key role in the formative phase of Sumerian civilization. They were central to the development of political institutions and helped to shape economic activity. A major function of the

temples was to organize irrigation. From small shrines at the beginning of the al-Ubaid culture, temples grew into massive structures. The social, religious, cultural, economic and political life of settlements in southern Mesopotamia revolved around them.

Excavations conducted at the site of Eridu, near al-Ubaid, have brought to light a huge temple built with mud bricks. This is one of the earliest settlements which provides us evidence of the dominant position of temples in Sumeria.

Given that temples had a pivotal position in Sumerian society, they could play an important role in organizing tasks related to irrigation. At the same time, their close connection with irrigation made them even more indispensable, thereby reinforcing their authority. Irrigation in southern Mesopotamia demanded considerable attention to detail. Deep canals had to be dug to carry water to the fields. Due to the fierce summer heat in the region, crops were mainly planted in September/October. This presented a formidable challenge from the point of view of irrigation. The water level of Mesopotamian rivers and streams was very low precisely at the time when the fields had to be irrigated. The flood waters of the Euphrates and the Tigris arrive in the lowlands only in April-May, that is, when the main agricultural season is over. They are too late for winter crops and too early for summer crops. Since water levels tended to be low during winter, canals had to be dug very deep so that water could be drawn off the rivers and their channels from these levels. This was all the more so because ancient southern Mesopotamian agriculturists had to rely primarily on canals in the absence of water-lifting devices.

An additional problem was that when the water level rose and the plain was flooded, it had to be drained. As we have noted, the landscape of southern Mesopotamia is so flat as to be virtually without a slope. This means that it takes considerable time for flood waters to be emptied into the sea. If it took very long for the water to be drained, there was the danger that fields would become waterlogged. A network of canals, dykes and reservoirs was created in

Sumeria over a period of time to avoid the threat of waterlogging and to accelerate drainage.

From the time of the al-Ubaid period onwards, temples were the mechanism for developing irrigation. The digging and upkeep of canals was a joint effort on the part of the community. A great deal of labour had to be performed collectively. All this was done under the supervision of temples. Priests and other temple personnel soon accumulated expertise in the matter of irrigation. This was used for evolving more efficient techniques as well as for asserting the authority of the temple. Gradually temples were transformed into instruments of political control. This process was spread over several centuries.

The contribution of the Uruk neolithic culture to human civilization is remarkable. This culture has yielded the earliest evidence that we have of the use of the wheel and the plough as well as of writing. With the Uruk culture we move from prehistory to protohistory. Uruk (modern Warka) was a large Sumerian settlement situated near the Euphrates. The Uruk culture represents a qualitative advance over al-Ubaid.

The Uruk culture saw the beginnings of wheel-turned pottery. Initially a slow turning wheel was used to shape the clay. Later, a fast potter's wheel was developed. Beautiful wheel-turned vases have been found at various Uruk sites. From the point of view of technology, wheel making was a momentous step. Wheels could be made efficiently only with metal tools. Metal axes and saws make it easier to cut wood into round shapes. In other words, the progress of metallurgy and wheel making was closely interlinked. Wheels were subsequently adapted for use in transportation. They were fitted in carts. Images of carts are depicted on some of the Uruk objects. The workmanship involved in making wheels and carts indicates that there were specialist carpenters in Uruk. Pottery making and metallurgy too had become specialized. This kind of specialization created conditions for further technological development.

In agriculture the introduction of the plough was the main breakthrough. This revolutionary new tool rendered

the breaking of soil much easier. Ploughs needed much less labour than digging sticks which had so far been used for the purpose. They loosened the earth with greater efficiency. It should not be assumed that the use of the plough immediately became widespread despite its tremendous advantages. Ploughs were costly and did not completely replace digging sticks for a long time. They had to await further developments in metallurgy which only occurred much later.

Excavations at Uruk sites have brought to light a large number of seals. There are two types of seals: stamp seals and cylinder seals. The seals most probably served to indicate ownership of goods. Originally rectangular stamp seals were made. Stamp seals often depicted animals or plants. These were followed by cylinder seals made of ordinary or semi-precious stone. These would be rolled on clay as a mark of identification. The small cylinder seals of the Uruk culture are artistically of a very high standard. Many of them depict mythological figures or scenes from everyday life. Georges Roux calls them 'art in miniature'.

The most outstanding achievement of Uruk was the development of writing. By about 3500 BC the economy of Sumeria had become sufficiently complex to necessitate some system of making a proper note of various transactions. It was not always possible to keep track of stocks or exchanges orally. Since temples were engaged in extensive economic dealings they pioneered the use of a written script. This allowed them to maintain a more durable record of transactions rather than having to rely on memory alone. Clay tablets were used for writing. Impressions were made on these tablets with a hard pointed device (stylus). The clay tablets were then dried in the sun or baked in an oven. This gave permanent shape to the document.

The earliest such tablets were of the nature of temple accounts and ration lists. These contain crude pictures of certain objects (fish, sheep, goats, ears of barley etc.). Later, these symbols were simplified further so that only the bare outline would be depicted. This kind of representation of

objects in the form of short-hand pictures is called pictographic writing and the symbols are referred to as pictograms. The forerunner of these pictograms has been found at Tell el-Oheimir (ancient Kish) on a small limestone tablet dating back to c. 3500. By 3200 this pictographic writing was employed by temples at several places in Sumeria.

The script evolved by the Sumerians is known as the cuneiform script. This grew out of the short-hand pictures. The pictograms became simpler and uniform. They were engraved on clay tablets with the tip of a stylus in the shape of small triangles or wedges (the word cuneiform is derived from the Latin word *cuneus* meaning 'wedge')- Each symbol was a combination of these wedges. Initially only objects were depicted. Over a period of time symbols were formed for other words also.

Towards the end of the Uruk period several settlements in Sumeria had grown into cities. The process of transition from villages to cities continued in the Jamdat Nasr period. A number of urban centres had come up in southern Mesopotamia by c. 3200-3100 BC. Gordon Childe calls this phenomenon 'the urban revolution'.

II

The emergence of cities is not merely a question of an increase in population. Of course, at a very basic level urbanization does imply the concentration of a large population. In terms of numbers this might be taken to mean a settlement with at least 5000 inhabitants. But an urban centre is not just an overgrown village (an increase of population can at times lead just to a simple multiplication of village units, i.e., a group of rural settlements rather than a city).

Urbanization denotes the concentration, in a particular settlement, of a fairly large population, pursuing diverse economic activities and having a high degree of interdependence. A prominent feature of urban centres is extensive specialization and division of labour on the one hand and absence of self-sufficiency on the other. Cities are

marked by complex social and economic organization. Elaborate political arrangements for regulating and controlling the settlement are also to be found. There are structures of authority for managing disputes. Moreover, cities contain some large buildings which have specific functions.

Gordon Childe notes that the growth of urban centres at the end of the neolithic period went hand in hand with other developments which were of far-reaching historical significance: i) centralized accumulation of capital resulting from the imposition of tribute or taxation; ii) monumental public works; iii) the invention of writing; iv) advances towards exact and predictive sciences; v) the emergence of a class stratified society; vi) the freeing of a part of the population from subsistence tasks for full time craft specialization; vii) the substitution of a politically organized society based on territorial principles, the state, for one based on kin ties; and viii) the appearance and growth of long distance trade in luxuries.

It is when we view the rise of cities in the context of these developments that we can grasp the importance of the 'urban revolution'. Childe placed special emphasis on the progress of metallurgy. He traced a link between urbanization, metallurgy and the rise of bronze age civilization.

We have seen that the production and use of metal presupposes the presence of specialists. Society should be able to support these specialists by providing them with food and other basic necessities.

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The use of metal can become widespread when it is possible for a group of specialists to permanently withdraw from food production. This would allow the specialist metallurgists to exclusively produce metal. However, in order to support this specialist activity, *society should be able to produce sufficient food over and above the requirements of food producers (surplus) on a regular basis*. The surplus can then sustain specialists.

In southern Mesopotamia an additional problem was that it did not possess deposits of copper. The metal had to be imported from outside. Copper was brought to Sumeria

mainly from Iran and Anatolia. In fact Sumeria was deficient in supplies of wood and stone as well. As a result, the Sumerians relied on a network of trade with other areas for procuring metal and other raw materials. This trade had to be carried on by exchanging the surplus produce of Sumeria for raw materials that the region lacked. A group of specialist traders came into existence to carry on this trade.

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It was imperative that there should be a suitable mechanism for the regular production and redistribution of the surplus. The surplus produce had to be stored and used for trade as well as to sustain artisans and traders. Gordon Childe points out that even though possibilities for producing a surplus were present in southern Mesopotamia during the neolithic, farmers might *not* have been inclined to produce over and above their immediate requirements. More labour is required for surplus production. Why should people constantly go on producing a surplus if their immediate needs are fulfilled? The technological and geographical possibility of producing a surplus does not necessarily lead to the regular production of that surplus. Some kind of compulsion might be needed to induce the farmers to produce a surplus on a permanent basis. This historical situation, as we shall see in the next section, coincided with the process of state formation and the creation of a coercive apparatus.

The production of surpluses set in motion another development. Systematic extraction of the surplus created conditions for its redistribution in an *inequitable* manner.

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Some groups in society were able to establish control over a disproportionately large share of the surplus. This share was far in excess of what these groups (chieftains, priests, warriors) contributed to society, unlike the artisans. At the other end there were groups which were denied their legitimate share of the surplus. This marked the division of society into *classes*: a class of people who actually produced (peasants, artisans, slaves); and a class which took over—appropriated—the bulk of the surplus and possessed political and economic power.

The growth of class society is yet another feature of the urban revolution. The division of labour which we have referred to in the context of the rise of the city was not just a functional division but reflected increasing stratification along class lines. State formation too has to be viewed against the backdrop of class differentiation. The state was primarily an instrument to perpetuate the domination of the class which appropriated a disproportionately large share of the surplus. The state performed other roles as well, as for instance, keeping conflicts in check, providing protection, promoting trade and organizing irrigation. The pattern of state formation which we find in Sumeria, in which the temple occupied a prominent place, should not be regarded as a universal pattern. State formation took different forms in other societies (in subsequent chapters we will discuss Egypt, Greece and Rome). But the basic characteristics of the state remained more or less the same.

According to Childe, urbanization was not an isolated event but was closely related to technological advance, metallurgy, surplus production, specialization, class differentiation, and state formation. All these elements, combined with the invention of writing, together constituted the urban revolution. The urban revolution ushered in *civilization*. Civilization is a definite stage of human social evolution. It is distinct from the earlier phases, namely, hunting-gathering ('savagery')/ and those neolithic societies which are not yet sufficiently advanced to produce surpluses ('barbarism'). Urbanization; surplus production; complex social systems; division of labour; existence of a state; organized religion; use of metal; development of writing and exact sciences are some of the traits of civilization.

Some scholars, as for example Robert Adams, are slightly critical of Gordon Childe because they feel that he attaches excessive importance to a particular attribute of civilization, i.e., the city. Secondly, some civilizations like those of America did not use metal and had no written script. Further, Adams has suggested that factors like changes in social organization, rather than technology (metallurgy),

were primarily responsible for the origin of civilization. However the main hypothesis of Childe concerning the role of surplus production is widely accepted.

At this point we must draw attention to some of the changes which had been taking place in social organization. As we saw in the previous chapter, the exogamous clan had become the principal social unit of neolithic societies. The clans had forged links with other clans by establishing exchange relationships. Marriage partners and goods were exchanged. These relationships helped in encouraging cooperation. A number of clans in a given area normally exchanged partners within a well-defined group. This group was often in the form of a tribe. Tribes had mutual social and economic ties and shared common beliefs, culture and language. As tribes evolved, they tended to impose restrictions on marrying *outside* the tribe. Social groups which are governed by the rule that no member of the group can marry outside the group are called endogamous. Thus tribes were endogamous, whereas clans were exogamous. Members of clans would marry outside their respective clans (exogamy) but *within* the tribe (endogamy). Clans can b

e seen here as lineage groups which were subunits of the tribe.

As tribes became cohesive and stable social units it was typical for them to trace their origin to a common ancestor. Generally, this would be a mythical ancestor who might be represented as a sign or totem. The totem was the symbol—some natural object like an animal or plant—by which the tribe identified itself. It was considered sacred and regarded as the progenitor of the entire tribe. This kind of totemic organization helped to unify the various subunits which constituted the tribe both internally and as vis-a-vis outsiders. It fostered solidarity in times of war.

Once the tribe had been settled at a place for some length of time it associated itself with that territory. It might be recalled that originally it was the transition to agriculture that had created conditions for sedentism. Sedentism had prompted social groups which were settled in close proximity to each other to form ties of cooperation with each

other. Not only was social organization becoming more complex but the nature of clans and tribes was being transformed. They were getting crystallized as territorial entities.

During most of the neolithic period the territory of the clan or tribe was the common property of the entire group. Land was owned collectively. Natural resources and water supply were controlled and managed in unison. There were no superior rights in land. If there were variations in the fertility of the soil, fields might be rotated among members of the clan/tribe. Since there was insufficient pasturage in southern Mesopotamia, cattle holdings had to be centralized. Any surplus that was produced would be shared by the group. Defending the territory was the responsibility of the group as a whole. When neighbouring territories were raided, the booty was redistributed equitably.

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With regular surplus production and its inequitable redistribution, it was no longer possible to maintain egalitarian relationships within the community. The clan/ tribe got differentiated into classes. Hierarchies appeared, thereby undermining collective ownership. The concept of private ownership of property came into existence. The period of transition from neolithic to bronze age was therefore also a period of transition from clan or tribe organization to a society with class stratification. Of course clans and tribes survived till very late in history, although their characteristics underwent considerable change. They continued to be important for purposes of marriage and ritual.

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III

We have already observed that artificial irrigation was the prerequisite for realizing the productive potential of southern Mesopotamia. Further, that temples played a vital role in organizing irrigation in the region.

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In the words of Robert Adams, 'the allocation of irrigation water was in the hands of temple officials . . . and the necessary labour forces

for the maintenance work were apparently organized and directed by the individual temples'. This circumstance strengthened the authority of the temple. The temple could use its authority to coerce peasants to grow a surplus. Coercion need not always have meant the use of force. People could have been compelled to produce a surplus by simply instilling the fear of displeasure of gods/goddesses in them. If gods/goddesses were dissatisfied they would cause crop failures. It should be kept in mind that despite the progress that agriculture had made, the outcome of a harvest was still a matter of great uncertainty and anxiety.

Through various myths, legends and rituals a value-system was ingrained among the people which stressed on the desirability of producing in abundance for the pleasure of the deities and for the welfare of the community. A part of the produce was collected in the form of offerings made to deities. The objective of these offerings was to propitiate the deities.

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Some of the rituals went back to the time when food production had just begun. The temple now became the point of collection, storage and redistribution of the surplus produce. Needless to say, coercion was ultimately backed by force and the threat that force would be resorted to in case of resistance.

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Sumerian priests already had physical access to a sizable portion of the surplus produce due to the role played by the temple in its storage and redistribution. They used this huge surplus to further consolidate their position. Part of the surplus was expended on warriors. Warriors defended the territory and engaged in raids on neighbouring territories. They also provided armed support to the priests for coercing peasants and artisans.

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From the time since southern Mesopotamia was settled, temples had been the focal point of the communities in the region. This is demonstrated by the archaeological record. The Eridu temple grew up into a large structure in the al-Ubaid period. It stands on a high platform and is the most prominent building of the settlement. The temple at Uruk was a massive structure. It was rebuilt at the same spot

several times (at least six times). At the end of the Uruk phase the temple was 245 feet by 100 feet and it rose to a height of 35 feet or more.

Another temple, at Uqair, was rebuilt thrice.

These huge temples, built in the shape of step pyramids with long flight of steps leading to the top, are referred to as ziggurats (or ziqqurats). This term is derived from the word *zaqaru* which means 'to build high'.

The main ziggurat at Uruk was the E-anna complex. This was devoted to the goddess Inanna (we will discuss this cult below). The E-anna complex was not only a place for ritual and worship.

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It contained warehouses, workshops, and living quarters for artisans. The warehouses were meant for centralized storage of grain. The grain was used to feed artisans who produced metal objects, pottery and textiles in the temple workshops. The surplus was also used to procure raw material, especially copper. The manner in which the religious, social and economic life of the community revolved around the temple has led Gordon Childe to describe these communities as 'temple households'.

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The temple was the nucleus around which the city developed. In the Jamdat Nasr culture a number of cities were concentrated in the extreme south of Mesopotamia: Uruk, Ur, Jamdat Nasr, Kish, Uqair etc. This was the time when city-states were being formed in the region. A large city and its surrounding countryside made up the city-state. The city-states were located at points where there were adequate water resources. Many cities were fortified.

The control which temples had over the surplus, over irrigation and over a wide range of economic activities facilitated the concentration of political authority in the hands of the priests. In addition, the priests had an important status as ritual specialists. It is not surprising therefore that the formation of the state in Sumeria was reflected in the growing political power of the temple.

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The various elements which constitute the *state* {kingship, army, law, bureaucracy, political bodies etc.) were associated with the temple. In early bronze age Mesopotamia the temple was the state. Anna Schneider has termed this as 'temple state'.

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From cS. 3100 BC Sumerian city-states were governed by chiefs or kings who also happened to be priests. Kingship was integrated with priestly functions. At this stage archaeological evidence can be supplemented with literary sources. Written texts in the cuneiform script are available for the period following the Jamdat Nasr culture. The cuneiform script had by now been systematized and symbols were being used not just for objects but for speech sounds. In Jamdat Nasr, the script had progressed from pictograms to being partly phonetic. This meant that some of the symbols stood for speech sounds (i.e. they had a phonetic value). Without this improvement it would have been difficult to denote various parts of grammar.

With written records we can fill in some of the details of political history. We are fortunate to possess detailed 'King Lists' which give an account of the main dynasties of ancient Mesopotamia. These lists are useful for working out the chronology of political events. Another useful source is the epic of Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh, the hero of the epic, was a ruler of Uruk. His heroic exploits became the subject of many legends. In these legends Gilgamesh was depicted as partly human and partly divine. The legends were compiled around 2000 BC in the form of a long poem, known as the 'Gilgamesh Epic'. This epic, the earliest of its kind, is an outstanding example of Mesopotamian literature and has come down to us more or less in its entirety. Apart from its great literary value it is rich in details about contemporary society and religion.

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In the periodization of Mesopotamian bronze age civilization, c. 3000 to 2350 BC is labelled as the Early Dynastic Period. In this period the major city states of Sumeria (Ur, Uruk, Kish, Lagash) struggled to gain supremacy over the fertile region. Many of these conflicts were over water rights. Warfare was a regular feature of the period. Raids against neighbouring states were the easiest way to augment the surplus. Chiefs or kings provided leadership in war and successful campaigns enhanced their prestige. The emergence of a class of soldiers for regular

warfare speeded up the process of state formation.

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The tribe as a whole no longer participated in war, or even if it did it was only to a limited extent. Specialist warriors were the mainstay of the army. This guaranteed that the majority of the people would not possess military training.

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Shortly after 2600 BC the city-state of Ur, under its First Dynasty, became the paramount power for some time. Subsequently other cities reasserted themselves. This state of affairs continued till the end of the Early Dynastic Period. Around 2350 BC a significant historical event occurred. A king from the relatively more backward region of Akkad brought almost the whole of southern Mesopotamia (Akkad and Sumeria) under his rule. The name of this ruler was Sargon (Sharru-kin).

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Though Akkad had so far lagged behind Sumeria economically and culturally, Sargon seems to have created a vigorous military system which made him such an effective leader. One of the earliest historical references which we have for the existence of a standing army is from Sargon's reign. Sargon speaks of 5400 soldiers eating bread in his presence.

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Sargon's conquests unified southern Mesopotamia politically for the first time. He established a new capital for his kingdom at Agade. Under Sargon the king became a powerful monarch with almost semi-divine status. The strengthening of monarchical traditions initiated the process of shifting political power from temple to palace.

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One might mention over here that the Akkadians were linguistically different from the Sumerians. The Akkadian language belonged to the Semitic group of languages. This was quite distinct from the language of the Sumerians. Following the Sargonic annexation of Sumeria, the cuneiform script was adopted by the Akkadians for their language. Other elements of Sumerian civilization were also absorbed by Akkad.

The dynasty founded by Sargon ruled for nearly two centuries. But Sargon's successors could not hold on to all the territories which Sargon had conquered. The Sumerian city-states could not be easily subdued on a permanent basis.

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The city of Ur again rose to prominence c. 2150 BC, this time under the Third Dynasty of Ur (2150-2000 BC). This was a glorious period for Ur. When the royal cemetery of the Third Dynasty rulers was excavated in the 1920s and 1930s by Sir Leonard Woolley, the finds made at the site caused a sensation. The royal graves yielded a vast collection of magnificent objects made of gold, silver and bronze. The craftsmanship of these items is of outstanding quality. The splendour of the royal cemetery revealed the genius of Sumerian civilization and pointed towards the enormous wealth accumulated by the ruling class of Ur.

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Following the collapse of the Third Dynasty of Ur, c. 2000 BC, the city-states of Isin and Larsa became important in Sumeria. Almost simultaneously, the city of Babylon (Bab-ilani or 'gate of the gods') near modern Baghdad was rising to prominence in Akkad.

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The Babylonian dynasty founded by Sumuabum in 1894 BC extended its influence over parts of Akkad and made Babylon a major political power. The sixth ruler of this dynasty was the famous Hammurabi who ruled for forty-three years, from 1792 to 1749.

Hammurabi founded a vast empire by conquering most of southern Mesopotamia and making northern Mesopotamia (Assyria) part of his domain.

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Under Hammurabi, Babylon became a great city, so much so that henceforth southern Mesopotamia was referred to as Babylonia. Hammurabi's lasting contribution was his code of law, which we will discuss in some detail below. Hammurabi was succeeded by Samsuiluna (1749-1712) who added new territories to the Babylonian empire. However Babylonian power declined under Samsuiluna's successors and eventually Babylon was captured by the Hittites of Anatolia (c. 1600 BC).

IV

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Robert Adams has drawn attention to the evidence from burial sites. In the al-Ubaid period differentiation was almost absent. The graves are uniform and articles of more or less similar types are found in them. Early Dynastic Period

burials show signs of stratification. A few graves contain objects made of metal, especially copper, but the majority of the graves ('poor graves') are without any metal implements. It should be borne in mind that metal was too precious to be buried together with the body of the owner. Even though we speak of a bronze age, everyone could not have afforded this material. Not only that. Metal could always be recycled. If it was buried along with the dead person it could not be utilized any longer. Therefore only the wealthier sections of society would have been inclined to bury metal objects.

By the time we come to graves of the Third Dynasty of Ur, class divisions in society are very clearly defined. At one end there is the royal cemetery where graves have gold objects and other articles of very high value. Personal servants, slaves and even palace officials associated with respective kings (or members of the royal family) were ceremonially buried with the dead person. For instance, one grave has nearly sixty bodies of the royal retinue which was buried alive at the funeral. Royal funerals were occasions for displaying the power and divine status of rulers.

A second category of graves contain objects of lesser value, mainly items made of copper. These are probably burial chambers of officials. Finally there are the graves of ordinary people in which there are hardly any valuable items. In the words of Adams, 'Here we see the remains of a peasantry presumably maintaining itself only slightly above the margins of subsistence, physically associated with an urban center but having few of the tangible symbols of its wealth or technological progress'.

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Contemporary documentary evidence confirms this picture. By c. 2000 BC the Mesopotamian social structure was rigidly stratified as is borne out by written texts, above all by Hammurabi's code of law.

Temple priests exercised supreme authority in the pre-Sargonic period. They controlled virtually every sphere of life. The activities of temples had steadily multiplied. As we have noted, Anna Schneider uses the term 'temple state' to describe the Early Dynastic city-states. In the written texts a

large number of persons are mentioned as being in the service of temples. These included cult personnel, artisans, labourers, people liable for rendering compulsory public duties, and slaves. It has been estimated that the construction of the Inanna temple at Uruk would have required the labour of at least 1500 full time workers for a period of not less than five years.

Most of the inhabitants were supposed to be in the service of the temple. Tribute was collected in the name of the deity. There is some controversy over the proportion of land which the temples actually owned. Initially all land, in theory at least, belonged to the temple. The temple symbolized the community as a whole. Over a period of time some of the land became the *private property* of ruling families, powerful chiefs and other dominant sections of society. Even then the temple remained one of the biggest landowners.

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Scholars are of the opinion that at least one third of the arable land was owned by temples. This land was tilled by tenants, sharecroppers, day labourers or slaves under the supervision of the temple authorities.

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At the beginning of the bronze age there were some survivals of older and more egalitarian social organization wherein there was wider participation by the people. This can be seen in the existence of institutions like *unken* in some city-states. *Unken* can be roughly translated as an assembly. The Akkadian term was *puhrum*, which had the same meaning. Incidentally, the Akkadians used the term *puhrum* synonymously with the Akkadian word for town or city (*alum*). This gives us a clue to the possible origins of *unken/puhrum*. It was originally perhaps an institution in which the inhabitants of the city were collectively represented. Its most important functions related to deliberating issues relating to war. In Early Dynastic times *unken/puhrum* was more of a consultative body in which real power was in the hands of special advisers called *shibutum* who were obviously heads of influential families.

However, despite these relics of an earlier era, such institutions were not very relevant to the political structure

as it had evolved by the Early Dynastic Period. We can be certain that Sargon, kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur, and Hammurabi ruled as absolute monarchs. Speaking of the Third Dynasty of Ur, Woolley says that the kings of this dynasty 'were deified in their life-time and worshipped as gods after their death'.

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The formal title of rulers of Ur and Kish was *lugal*, which means 'big man' in Sumerian. This became a commonly used royal title for kings who ruled over an extensive territory. Some kings bore the title *en*. *En* was a title frequently used by priest-rulers and literally signified 'spouse of the city goddess'. In this title we see the merging of political power and priestly functions. In certain other cases rulers are called *ensi*. This is usually translated as 'city ruler' or 'governor'. It denoted a status that was inferior to *lugal*. *Ensis* were often rulers of smaller territories who might have accepted the overlordship of a powerful monarch. The title *ensi* contains within it the term *en*, which once again indicates the intimate connection which *ensis* had with the temple.

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This link is reflected in a few other titles of rulers too, e.g., *sangu* (temple administrator), and *ishakku* (tenant farmer of the deity). Under Hammurabi power was fully concentrated in the person of the monarch. The palace, rather than the temple, became the main seat of political authority. Before we turn to Hammurabi's code of law and the kind of social formation it reveals, let us briefly describe some features of Sumerian religion in the bronze age.

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We cannot speak of Sumerian religion in the sense of a single, unified belief. The Sumerian cities had their own respective gods and goddesses. The main deity of the city had a big temple (*ziggurat*) dedicated to it. It is here that the official religious ceremonies were performed. The deity associated with the big temple was the dominant cult of the community residing in the city and the surrounding countryside. At the same time there were smaller shrines in various localities. The deities at these shrines were worshipped by particular groups. These could either be deities of certain professional groups or else of clans or tribes.

However, the inhabitants of southern Mesopotamia shared certain religious practices and beliefs. The Sumerians as a people had evolved some common traditions. The making of these traditions was an ongoing process—a process which was the product of political unification and cultural exchanges. The Sumerian priests systematized myths, rituals and religious ideas to create a pantheon in which several cults were accommodated. By a process assimilation many of the deities became merely relatives, servants or officials of the great gods. At the popular level minor deities, as distinct from official cults, continued to be worshipped.

The city of Nippur emerged as the religious centre of unified Sumeria.

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The large collection of religious texts found at the Nippur library give us fairly comprehensive information about Sumerian religion, especially at the level of official cults. Similar collections have also been discovered at Assur and Nineveh.

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The three most important Sumerian gods were An (or Anu), Enlil, and Enki (or Ea). On some occasions political shifts were accompanied by attempts to promote a few other gods, but such attempts were shortlived.

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With the ascendancy of Babylon, Marduk, the chief deity of the city, was temporarily elevated to the status of supreme god. Marduk never found universal acceptance and the worship of this god remained confined to Babylon. Generally, Sumerian gods had a much wider appeal than Akkadian gods even during phases of Akkadian political supremacy.

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An was the highest power in the universe and was the sovereign of all gods. He does not usually intervene in earthly affairs and remains aloof. The main temple of An was at Uruk. Enlil was the most eminent among the gods worshipped by the Sumerians. Enlil was originally the city deity of Nippur. This was one of the reasons for the importance of Nippur as a religious centre. Enlil was regarded as the master of humanity and as king of kings. It was believed that Enlil had separated Earth from sky and created the world. Enlil was also associated with storm and

thunder. It was to Enlil that kings appealed when they prayed for favours. Enki was literally 'lord of earth'. In Sumeria the earth cannot bear fruit without water, therefore Enki was identified with sweet water. He was worshipped as the god of sweet water.

As we can see, these gods have features which overlap. The distinctions are not always clear. This kind of confusion was inevitable in a situation where an attempt was being made to accommodate diverse cults in the Sumerian pantheon.

A striking development of the period c. 3000-2000 BC was the decline of female deities. As the bronze age progressed, most of the cults which centred around goddesses were pushed into the background. While many of these cults eventually disappeared, some goddesses were assimilated in the pantheon in such a manner that they invariably had a lower status as compared to male deities. Mother-goddess cults, which had been prevalent throughout the neolithic, were completely marginalized. The marginalization of goddesses was the outcome of the general relegation of women to an inferior position during the bronze age.

There was one exception to this tendency. One goddess who continued to command a big following was Inanna. Though at times Inanna was assimilated as the consort of major gods, she was essentially an independent goddess. She had her own temples and a distinct cult.

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The origins of the Inanna cult can be traced back to Uruk where, as we have noted, a large temple was devoted to this goddess. The worship of Inanna is possibly even older than the Uruk culture.

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As a mother-goddess she was a symbol of fertility. The major festival connected with Inanna was the annual marriage of Inanna with the god Dumuzi. Dumuzi was the god of vegetation and cattle. This festival was meant to ensure a good harvest. The date harvest was also connected with the ritual wedding of Inanna and Dumuzi. This suggests that the Inanna cult had evolved when people began to inhabit southern Mesopotamia and dates were crucial for their nourishment. Inanna was primarily a

Sumerian goddess.

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When the Akkadians established their rule over Sumeria they too began to worship her.

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The Akkadians identified Inanna with their goddess of love— Ishtar.

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Later the worship of Ishtar spread to other parts of West Asia, north Africa and southern Europe. Ishtar remained one of the most popular goddesses right down to the Roman Empire.

V

Hammurabi's code of law is not really a legal code in the sense of a comprehensive, systematic arrangement of all the laws governing Mesopotamian society. It is not even the earliest compilation of laws.

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Mesopotamian rulers had a tradition of recording some important laws and judgements, documents belonging to the reign of Urukagina, the ruler of Lagash c. 2350 BC, record some laws of this king. Codes prepared by Urnammu, the founder of the Third Dynasty of Ur (c. 2113-2095), and Lipitishtar of Isin (c. 1934-1924) have also been discovered.

Customary law was the basis of the legal structure. Rulers would usually apply the laws of their predecessors. However changes in society created new situations for which modifications had to be made in existing laws. Sometimes new laws had to be formulated. Rulers would issue edicts which contained these modifications. These were often of the nature of royal judgements which could be used as precedents. Towards the end of his reign, Hammurabi carried out a thorough compilation of laws, many of which were intended to guide judges in situations which were not provided for in existing law.

In order to familiarize the people with these laws Hammurabi had them inscribed and placed in several parts of the empire. Many inscriptions were placed in temples. One such inscription was placed at the temple of Shamash in the city of Sippar.

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This was later taken to Susa (modern Shush in Iran) where it was discovered in 1901. The Susa inscription is the most well known of all the copies of Hammurabi's

code.

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It has 282 laws which cover a very wide range of subjects.

The code confirms the existence of a highly stratified society. This was a class society with separate provisions in the code for various classes. The code recognizes three main classes: *zardu*, *mushkenu* and *awelu*. *Wardu* was the term used for slaves. By Hammurabi's time there was a considerable slave population in Mesopotamia. Slaves were mostly prisoners of war or those who were forced to accept slave status due to their inability to repay loans.

The ability to produce a surplus on a regular basis had been the first precondition for the emergence of slavery. It is meaningless to reduce someone to the status of a slave unless the slave can produce something over and above what is required for his or her own subsistence. Slavery becomes possible when society reaches a stage where it can produce a surplus. Warfare was the second precondition for slavery. Communities which were engaged in warfare had at their disposal specialist warriors and sufficient military force to capture people from amongst their enemies and make them slaves. Enslavement implied complete dehumanization of a person. Slaves were treated as things and not as human beings. To make a group of people accept permanent captivity, a society would need to have access to force on a sufficiently large scale. The first slaves were women. When a group was conquered, the normal practice was to kill the men and enslave the women. It would have required too

much armed force to watch over men slaves who possessed military training. It was much later, when society was in a position to mobilize armed force on a massive scale, that men were made slaves. By c. 2000 BC there were both male and female slaves in Mesopotamia.

The *wardu* had distinctive marks on their bodies. This made it difficult for them to run away. They were shaven and branded. In Hammurabi's code the penalty for helping a slave to escape was death. Slave owners had absolute power over their slaves. If a person caused harm to another person's slave the penalty was the same as that for damaging property.

Slaves were used for domestic work and for doing menial jobs. Many female slaves were engaged in weaving. Temples and royal households had large numbers of slaves working for them. Some slaves were employed in agricultural production. This was on a limited scale since extensive slavery was not the basis of the Mesopotamian economy. Moreover, Gordon Childe observes: 'It is not at all likely that slaves and captives formed an important element in the labour force engaged on public works'.

The *awelu* were the uppermost stratum of society. Leonard Woolley regards them as the nobility. Georges Roux merely describes them as free persons. Igor M. Diakonoff suggests that *awelu* were free inhabitants enjoying superior rights. This class had a better social and economic status as compared to other free persons. The *awelu* included priests, nobles, military leaders, warriors, scribes (those who were trained in writing the cuneiform script), and big farmers. The ruling elite was drawn from amongst the *awelu*.

The superior status of the *awelu* can be better understood with reference to another section of the free population, the *mushkenu*. The *mushkenu* did not enjoy certain rights. They could not hold public office and were usually not allowed to possess weapons. Their right to property was limited. They were tenants rather than landowners. The *mushkenu* stood much lower than the *awelu* in the social hierarchy of Mesopotamia. Yet they were free, unlike the *wardu*. Whereas

laws in the code ordinarily apply to the *awelu* and *mushkenu* in a similar manner, most of the penalties prescribed are much lighter for the *awelu*.

Almost one-fourth of the laws in the code pertain to marriage and the regulation of family relationships.

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Changes in social organization had to be provided for in the legal structure. On the one hand there was class stratification and on the other hand decline of clan or tribal organization led to growing emphasis on the family as the primary social unit. The emergence of private property meant that rules for inheritance had to be properly defined. There must have been a large number of disputes over the inheritance of property. The family, rather than the clan, now became the main unit for control over property.

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Property was inherited within the family.

A related development of great significance was the subjugation of women in the bronze age. Frederick Engels in his work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* has called this 'the world historical defeat of the female sex'.

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In hunting-gathering societies and early neolithic societies there had been some division of labour between men and women. For instance, men might have engaged in hunting while food gathering was mainly the responsibility of women. One reason for this division of labour was the role played by women in reproduction and in tending infants. It would not have been feasible for them to venture out on hunting expeditions, especially if the expedition was spread over a few days.

With the development of agriculture, agrarian communities took to sedentism and established ties of cooperation with one another. These ties were strengthened through exchanges, notably exchange of marriage partners. Though both male and female partners might have been exchanged, scholars have pointed out that the tendency would have been to exchange women. Women would give birth to children and thereby could be tied down to a new group more easily. Their reproductive function would give them a stake in the group into which they had married, ensuring their loyalty.

Men on the other hand would find it easy to break their ties and run away. Women thus became commodities to be exchanged primarily for the purpose of producing children. This was an important consideration for primitive societies. Later, with the development of warfare, the capture of women became another source for procuring them.

Once woman had become a 'thing' she no longer enjoyed an equal status. Society became male dominated (patriarchal). Descent was traced in the male line, i.e., it was patrilineal. The creation of patriarchy brought to an end the equality of sexes. Surplus production, warfare, enslavement of women for reproduction and for labour led to further subordination of women. In class society women were denied access to property. The structure of the family was patriarchal. The husband controlled property and exercised absolute power over the household.

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Hammurabi's code sought to strengthen the structure of the patriarchal family. The authority of the father could not be questioned. If a son hit his father, the father could punish the son by cutting off his hand. Marriage was generally monogamous, at least for the ordinary people. A dowry settlement would be made at the time of marriage. When a woman died, her dowry went to her sons. Divorce was a male prerogative. According to the code one of the acceptable grounds for divorce was that a woman had behaved 'foolishly wasting her house and belittling her husband'. The most common reason for divorce was the failure to give birth to sons.

Another category of laws in the code deal with the economy. A farmer who undertook to reclaim wasteland was allowed three years to perform the task. In the first year he paid no tax; half the normal tax in the second year; and the full rate in the third year. The laws make it clear that every holder of land had to maintain the bank of any canal that flowed past the fields, and any neglect which might result in damage to adjacent fields was punishable. Then there are laws which lay down the price that had to be paid for certain services, e.g., surgery.

Some of the laws throw light on the Hammurabi's military organization. The code has references to the system of *ilkum*, which was a mechanism for enlisting military service. *Ilkum* implied a grant of land which obliged the holder to serve in the army.

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It is not very clear as to how *ilkum* operated, but this institution was useful for mobilizing military support.

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Many of the punishments in the code are based on the principle of 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. Thus if an architect had built a house for an *awelu*, and the house collapsed leading to the death of the *awelu*, the architect could be punished with death. Some scholars are of the opinion that punishments of this nature were not necessarily imposed in all cases. There was also a lot of scope for arbitrariness. Moreover, it is wrong to think that Hammurabi was responsible for introducing this principle. The customary law of many traditional societies is based on similar principles of punishment being the exact physical equivalent of the injury caused.

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Mesopotamian laws, including those enshrined in Hammurabi's code, exerted considerable influence over the legal systems of other societies of West Asia. Many of these laws were later modified and adapted to suit the social conditions of the people of this region.

Chapter Five

EARLY EGYPTIAN CIVILIZATION

PRIOR to the discovery of Sumerian civilization in the early twentieth century, Egyptian civilization was generally considered to be the oldest civilization. This was mainly due to the continuous existence of Egyptian civilization for an exceptionally long period. Several features of Egyptian civilization endured for almost three thousand years. The ancient Greeks and Romans adopted many Egyptian traditions when they ruled over the country. Accounts of Greco-Roman historians dwell on the antiquity of Egyptian civilization. Judaic (Jewish), Christian and Islamic religious texts are replete with references to Egypt and its kings (pharaohs). For centuries the monumental remains of ancient Egypt, as for instance the pyramids, had a profound impact on popular imagination. The memory of Egyptian civilization therefore remained alive till modern times when a more systematic study of its history was initiated.

We have already noted that the neolithic developed relatively late in Egypt. Features of civilization and the urban revolution began to appear in Egypt somewhat later than in Sumeria. However the transition from the neolithic age to early civilization occurred fairly rapidly in Egypt and by about 5000 years ago the whole country had been politically unified. The 'King Lists' of Egypt go back to c. 3100 BC. Unfortunately several aspects of the period of transition to civilization remain somewhat obscure because

the archaeological record of this period is not as extensive as in the case of Mesopotamia.

A brief account of some of the geographical features of Egypt will be useful for a better understanding of its history. Most of Egypt is a dry, arid region with very little rainfall. The western part of the country is a vast desert which merges with the Sahara. This desert area is referred to as the Western Desert. The eastern part of Egypt is also a desert stretching from the Red Sea to the Nile. There are some low hills in this area. This is called the Eastern Desert. Egypt however is fortunate to have the river Nile flowing through it. The Nile runs along the entire length of Egypt, from south to north, and discharges its waters into the Mediterranean Sea. The river flows through a valley. At places the valley is almost 25 km wide. This valley is bounded by cliffs and desert.

The Nile valley is the most fertile region of Egypt. The annual flooding of the river provides excellent prospects for irrigation in this otherwise arid country. The Nile forms a delta at the northern end of the valley before flowing into the Mediterranean. This delta area in the north is usually called Lower Egypt. The southern portion of the country is referred to as Upper Egypt. In Upper Egypt the Nile has its course through a rift with rocks on either side. Thus the country can broadly be divided into: i) Western Desert; ii) Nile valley; and iii) Eastern Desert. During the historical period the Nile valley was the main area in which the population was concentrated. This is in turn divided into two parts: i) the delta or Lower Egypt; and ii) Upper Egypt. The land lying to the south of Egypt was called Nubia.

I

Unlike what was presumed earlier, the Egyptian neolithic did not originate in the Nile valley, but in the Western Desert. This has to be viewed in the context of the environmental history of Egypt. The work of Karl Butzer (*Early Hydraulic Civilization in Egypt*) has shed light on some

of the changes which occurred in the region during the early holocene. There was initially a period of increased rainfall which lasted from about 9200 BC to 6000 BC. This was followed by a dry interval till 5000 BC. After some further fluctuations, during which there were wet spells, the present arid conditions were established c. 2400 BC. This would suggest that in the early holocene some parts of the desert were not as dry as they became later on. Subsequent research by scholars like F. Hassan has shown that during the early Holocene the Western Desert had more water, and that the Nile valley suffered widespread flooding in this period. As the valley was flooded, groups which inhabited this area moved towards the Western Desert. Since the Western Desert was relatively more hospitable in those times, it could support a food gathering and hunting economy.

The hunter-gatherers of the Western Desert probably experimented with cultivation of wild cereals and might have tried to domesticate animals. By c. 8000 BP there is evidence of domesticated barley (six-rowed barley, which requires more moisture than two-rowed barley) in this area. Subsequently as the desert became increasingly arid, people shifted towards the Nile valley. We have seen in chapter three that settlers in the valley began practising agriculture c. 7000 BP. Between 7000 and 6500 BP neolithic economy developed in Lower Egypt. The earliest neolithic sites in Lower Egypt have been discovered at Fayum and Merimde. It has been suggested that the neolithic of this area might have been influenced by West Asian cultures. As for Upper Egypt, we still do not know much about the beginnings of food production here. Recent archaeological evidence indicates that the neolithic began in southern Egypt after c. 6500 BP.

Following the early neolithic settlements at Fayum and Merimde, there were three successive neolithic cultures in the Nile valley. As these cultures evolved, the people became progressively adept at utilizing the floods of the Nile for agriculture. The three cultures identified by

archaeologists are: Badarian, Amratian (or Naqada I) and Gerzean (or Naqada II). The Badarian culture (named after the site of Badari), c. 4100-3600 BC, saw the emergence of several neolithic villages along the Nile. It is likely that the inhabitants of these villages were descendants of those who had moved into the valley from the Western Desert. The Badarians cultivated barley and wheat. They had domesticated sheep, goats and cattle. Pottery was made. They still relied on some food gathering and hunting although agriculture, based on natural irrigation by Nile floods, played a more important role in the economy.

The features of the Amratian culture (named after El Amrah), c. 3800 to 3500 BC, were more or less the same as that of the Badarian, though the floods of the Nile were exploited more systematically. The number of neolithic settlements increased throughout the valley. There is also some evidence of the use of copper by the Amratians.

It was during the Gerzean culture (which gets its name from the site of El Gerzeh) that the Egyptians initiated artificial irrigation by controlling inundation. Canals were dug to carry the water so that fields located at some distance from the Nile could be cultivated. This created conditions for producing a surplus. The soil of the Nile valley is so fertile that it has been estimated that under normal circumstances a farming family can, even with relatively primitive technology, produce almost three times as much food as is required for its own sustenance. This should give us some idea of the potential which Egypt has for producing a huge surplus. By the end of the Gerzean culture there had been a marked rise in population. Karl Butzer has estimated that between 4000 and 3000 BC population went up from 350,000 to 870,000. The Gerzeans made copper objects and had kilns in which temperatures as high as 1200 °C could be attained. As we shall see, this was the period in which the foundations of early Egyptian civilization were laid.

The Gerzean culture culminated in the political unification of Egypt. This was an event of great historical significance, although the process by which it came about

remains imperfectly understood. By c. 3100 BC Egypt was a politically unified state with a powerful monarchy. There was a bureaucracy and there were warriors and priests. Several prominent urban centres had come up in the Nile valley. A script was being used for writing. Egyptian society had become a class society and had acquired the various attributes of 'civilization' which we discussed in the previous chapter. The transition to civilization was apparently so swift that a few scholars have argued that some groups (possibly from West Asia) might have entered Egypt, bringing with them new ideas and techniques thereby speeding up the transition. Leonard Woolley has suggested that some features of Egyptian civilization, as for instance writing, may have been borrowed from Mesopotamia.

Among those who have argued in terms of foreign influences providing the impetus for the emergence of Egyptian civilization one might mention W.B. Emery (*Archaic Egypt*). Emery contends that some groups from West Asia entered southern Egypt via the Red Sea, bringing with them Sumerian influences. According to Emery it is uncertain as to precisely who these outsiders were, but we can interpret some ancient Egyptian myths as referring to the conflict between these foreigners and the indigenous people.

In Egyptian mythology a prominent place was occupied by the god Horus, depicted as a falcon, who was identified with the kings of Egypt. One of the most well known legends connected with Horus concerned the struggle of Horus with his uncle Set. We will discuss this myth in some detail below. It will suffice for the moment to mention that Set was supposed to have assassinated his brother Osiris. Osiris was the father of Horus. Horus eventually avenged the death of his father by killing Set. Emery sees the conflict between Horus and Set as a reflection of the struggle between foreigners (falcon worshippers) and the indigenous population (Set worshippers). He points out that there was a very ancient tradition of Set worship in many parts of

Egypt. Set (Sutekh) had been worshipped for a long time as the god of the barren desert. On the other hand, the worship of Horus was of relatively recent origin. However in the myth, as it eventually developed, Set was portrayed as evil. This indicates the victory of the falcon worshippers.

A large number of historians consider it much more likely that Egyptian civilization had its roots in the Gerzean/ Naqada II cultures. Glyn Daniel refers to the rich potential of the Nile valley which created possibilities for civilization. He states that in the period preceding political unification, Egypt was already on the way to civilization and could have reached there without inputs from Mesopotamia. B.G. Trigger has a similar understanding and he stresses the need to look at continuities between the Gerzean culture and early civilization. Trigger does not completely rule out external stimulus but says that there seems to be no evidence that large scale migrations from outside were responsible for Egyptian civilization. He is particularly critical of the hypothesis that similarities between ancient Egyptian and {West Asian} Semitic languages were the result of migrations into Egypt. According to him there is nothing unusual in this as it has been shown that many ancient languages spoken over a wide area in southwest Asia and north Africa had a common ancestor.

In any case, as Butzer notes, growing aridity resulted in the Nile valley being completely surrounded by desert (Western desert, Eastern desert, and Nubian desert). This restricted the interaction with West Asia, Nubia and the Sahara, accounting for the 'closed' nature of the Nile valley. At the same time the 'closed' character of the valley gave it greater uniformity and cohesion, facilitating the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt.

II

Circa 3100 BC marks the beginning of the Dynastic Period of ancient Egyptian history. We can gather some particulars of the political history of this period from a historical

account written by Manetho. Manetho was a priest who lived during the period of Greek rule over Egypt (following Alexander the Great's invasion). It should be borne in mind that Manetho's *History of Egypt* was written almost 2800 years after the unification of Egypt. However he had access to a number of ancient works which formed the basis of his narrative. Manetho's *History* has been found useful by modern historians to work out the chronology of ancient Egypt. This is all the more so since many of the details mentioned by him have been corroborated by archaeological evidence as well as other sources.

Manetho listed thirty-one dynasties which had ruled over Egypt from its unification down to Alexander's conquest. These dynasties were classified by him into several periods such as Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom and New Kingdom with intervening phases (First Intermediate Period, Second Intermediate Period, etc.). Modern historians continue to use Manetho's periodization. This broad periodization is convenient because the change of a particular dynasty did not always necessarily involve major social and political changes. Our discussion of early Egyptian civilization will mainly be confined to the Early Dynastic Period (or Archaic Period) and the Old Kingdom.

The Early Dynastic Period was the period during which the First and Second Dynasties ruled over Egypt (c. 3100 to 2686 BC). This was followed by the Old Kingdom—Third Dynasty to Sixth Dynasty (c. 2686 to 2181 BC). For a short while after the Sixth Dynasty the picture is somewhat confusing. This is called the First Intermediate Period (c. 2181 to 2133 BC), Seventh to Tenth Dynasties. A new phase commenced with the reign of the Eleventh Dynasty. This was the Middle Kingdom (c. 2133 to 1786 BC), Eleventh and Twelfth Dynasties. After the Twelfth Dynasty there was another intermediate period, the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1786 to 1567 BC), Thirteenth to Seventeenth Dynasties. The Second Intermediate Period was followed by the New Kingdom (c. 1567 to 1080 BC), Eighteenth to Twentieth Dynasties. Though Manetho records a unilinear succession

of dynasties, it is likely that there were phases when different parts of Egypt were concurrently ruled by separate dynasties. Such rulers are not accounted for in Manetho's list.

According to Manetho, Egypt was unified by a ruler named Menes. We are not certain whether Menes was a historical figure. Archaeological excavations have brought to light some evidence pertaining to a ruler by the name of Nar-mer who might have played an important role in the unification of Egypt. It has been suggested that Nar-mer could be identified with the legendary Menes. Unfortunately almost no records of the First Dynasty have survived. What we know is that the first two dynasties came from the town of Thinis in Upper Egypt. Hence they are also called 'Thinite Dynasties'.

The First Dynasty was responsible for the unification of Lower and Upper Egypt. This unification was possibly the work of Nar-mer (who may have been the same as Menes). The memory of this event was preserved in the tradition of designating all Egyptian rulers as kings of both 'Upper and Lower Egypt'. As a symbol of this unification the kings wore a double crown: a white crown representing Upper Egypt and a red crown representing Lower Egypt. The king was an all-powerful monarch—the pharaoh. The word pharaoh is the Hebrew form of the ancient Egyptian term *per-o* (or *per-aa*) which meant 'Great House'. This was a reference to the palace.

Although the First Dynasty succeeded in integrating Egypt on a long-term basis, their endeavour must have been preceded by similar attempts in the predynastic period. State formation was already taking place in the predynastic period. A number of petty-states had emerged in the Nile valley. These were ruled by chieftains who controlled relatively small territories. It would seem that through a process of forming coalitions of petty-states and/or through subjugation, larger territorial units were created eventually leading to the political unification of the valley.

Many of the predynastic petty-states survived for a long time after unification in the form of provincial

administrative units. These administrative units were called *nomes* by the Greeks (the ancient Egyptian word for *nome* was *spt*). In the dynastic period *nomes* were stable entities and had well defined territories. The provincial elites of these *nomes* could be quite powerful. The *nomes* had their own emblems which were often animal symbols. The symbols were originally totems of the dominant clans settled in the respective *nomes*. Thus the *nomes* of the dynastic period probably had their roots in the predynastic petty-states. After unification these states were incorporated in the administrative structure in the form of *nomes* and in many cases the territories of the *nomes* corresponded to the former predynastic states.

We are not in a position* to estimate the number of petty-states which had come up in the predynastic period, but we learn that at the time of unification there were forty-two *nomes*. Twenty-two of these were in Upper Egypt and twenty were in Lower Egypt. It is likely that the political unification of Upper Egypt took place much before Upper and Lower Egypt were merged. Excavations at Nekhen in Upper Egypt have revealed one of the earliest sites with monumental architecture. This city was called Hierakonpolis ('city of the falcon') by the Greeks and may well have been the capital of unified Upper Egypt in the predynastic period. Incidentally, Manetho used Greek names for cities and rulers, which can be somewhat confusing at times.

The rulers of the First Dynasty established their capital at Memphis located at the junction of Upper and Lower Egypt. Memphis (the remains of this ancient city lie just south of modern Cairo) remained the capital of Egypt for several centuries. This city in fact gave its name to the entire country. 'Egypt' is derived from Hikupteh, the ancient Egyptian name of Memphis. By this time large urban centres, several of which were fortified, had appeared throughout the Nile valley. The majority of the urban centres which developed towards the end of the Gerzean culture/ predynastic period were located in Upper Egypt. These included Hierakonpolis (Nekhen), Abydos (Thinis), Ombos

(Naqada), Elkab and Coptos. In Upper Egypt there were Sais and Buto.

By c. 3200 Egypt had developed a script. The Egyptian script is called 'hieroglyphic' which means 'sacred carving'. This was the name given to the script by ancient Greeks when they came across texts written in this script carved on stone in temples or tombs. Although the symbols used in the hieroglyphic script are very different from Sumerian cuneiform writing, yet in both scripts a sign could denote either an object or a sound (or even an idea). This form of writing is said to be based on the 'rebus' principle in which a combination pictograms or symbols are used to represent objects, words or syllables. The hieroglyphic script remained in use for nearly 3500 years. The Egyptians also had a slightly modified form of hieroglyphic writing called 'hieratic'. The hieratic script was similar to the hieroglyphic, but in this script the signs were simpler, more rounded and less intricate. The hieratic script was suitable for everyday purposes, especially when a lengthy document had to be written on papyrus with a brush (papyrus was a paper-like writing material made from the papyrus plant).

Archaic Egypt was a highly stratified class society governed by a tiny elite centred around the pharaoh. This ruling class had access to the huge surplus of Upper and Lower Egypt. The political unification of the Nile valley over an extended period of time made the river the main highway to transport the surplus for centralized storage and redistribution. A disproportionately large share of the surplus was appropriated as tribute in the name of the pharaoh and distributed among the royal family, the priesthood, the bureaucracy, and the army. This tribute further reinforced the position of the pharaoh as an all powerful monarch. Even in late predynastic times there is evidence of social stratification. The graves at Hierakonpolis, Naqada and Abydos point towards the presence of a wealthy elite. Some of the tombs belong to rulers and their families.

The pharaohs presided over an elaborate administrative structure which included a large bureaucracy. One of the

important functions of the bureaucracy was to supervise irrigation. From an early date there is reference to an official called *adj-mer* (literally, 'canal digger') who was held charge of irrigation works. The importance of this official grew with time and we later find that the term *adj-mer* was also used as a title for provincial governors. In view of the critical dependence of Egyptian agriculture on annual Nile floods, it was necessary for the state to keep itself informed about the level of water. For this purpose there was a branch of the administration (*per-mu*) which was entrusted with the task of recording and reporting water levels.

The annual inundation of the Nile is primarily caused by monsoon rains on the Ethiopian plateau where the Blue Nile, one of the branches of the main Nile, originates at Lake Tana. These rains cause the level of the water to rise. In Egypt the river begins to rise in June and the water reaches its highest level by September. Thereafter the river begins to recede. The seed was sown in October/November when the floods began to subside and water had been drained from the fields. Between August and January the Nile can be utilized for irrigation by channelling the water into fields. By February the level is too low for the purpose. The agricultural cycle was divided into three seasons: *akhet* or flood; *peret* or germination (sprouting); and *chemu* or harvest. It is worth noting that the annual inundation coincides with the agricultural season, a feature which we do not find in Mesopotamia. This renders irrigation a relatively easier task in Egypt. Unlike Mesopotamia, where detailed attention has to be paid to irrigation facilities depending on local conditions, only a generalized supervision of irrigation is required in Egypt.

Whereas the floods are on the whole quite regular, there can be variations in the water level. A difference of six feet either way can create problems. If the river rises more than six feet above the normal flood level, the countryside tends to become waterlogged delaying agricultural operations. On the other hand if the level is more than six feet below normal it is insufficient for irrigation. Consequently the water level

was a matter of great concern to the Egyptian state. It kept a close watch on the status of the annual flood so that the nature of the harvest could be ascertained.

III

It was during the Old Kingdom that Egyptian civilization entered its mature phase. The achievements of the Old Kingdom had a profound impact on Egyptian culture and civilization for several centuries. In this period the Egyptian ruling class, headed by the pharaoh, further consolidated its power. This allowed it to increase its control over the rich resources of the country. The pharaoh was by now firmly established as a god. Even in the Archaic Period, the pharaoh was being projected as a divinity. We should note that in Egypt the priesthood generally played a secondary role in relation to the king. The king himself was worshipped as a god. The Old Kingdom witnessed the growth of elaborate rituals connected with the worship of the pharaoh. The cult of the pharaoh was vigorously promoted and this cult came to occupy an important place in Egyptian religion. Many of the prominent Egyptian deities were gradually associated with the cult of the pharaoh. This made the Egyptian rulers omnipotent in an unprecedented way.

The archaeological remains of the Old Kingdom help us to reconstruct some of the features of state and society in the Old Kingdom. The most impressive buildings are the royal tombs. The practice of constructing gigantic monuments for the burial of pharaohs commenced in the Third Dynasty with the step pyramid of Djoser. Djoser was the founder of the Third Dynasty. He built a huge monument at Saqqara (near Memphis) for his own burial. Before this the pharaohs had been buried in large underground cemeteries called 'mastabas'. From the time of Djoser overground mausoleums began to be constructed.

Djoser's step pyramid revolutionized Egyptian architecture. His tomb was made entirely with stone, being

the earliest surviving Egyptian monument to be built fully of stone. The stones were placed very skilfully in such a manner that large steps were formed on each of the four sides of the building. The arrangement of steps gave the structure a pyramidal shape. Djoser's step pyramid is supposed to have been designed by Imhotep whose name is inscribed on it. Imhotep's fame as an architect endured for centuries right up to the period of Greek rule. Imhotep was raised to the status of a god and worshipped by the Egyptians and later by the Greeks. The Greeks identified Imhotep with Asclepios, the god of healing.

The architecture of the pyramids continued to evolve under the successors of Djoser—from step pyramids to true pyramids—till it reached its climax in the Fourth Dynasty. The Fourth Dynasty pyramids, situated at Giza close to modern Cairo, are staggering in their dimensions. In terms of sheer size these monuments were unparalleled in the ancient world. The Fourth Dynasty pyramids highlight the unique position which the pharaohs occupied within the Egyptian ruling class. They are also a reflection of the extensive resources which were at the command of that class. The two most spectacular pyramids of the Giza group are those of Cheops or Khufu (second ruler of the Fourth Dynasty) and one of his successors, Chephren (or Khafre). The pyramid in which Cheops was buried has a square base with each side measuring 235 metres. It is 146.5 metres high. The pyramid of Chephren has a base of 215.25 square metres and is 143.5 metres high.

The gigantic proportions of these pyramids can be gauged from the fact that each of them was built out of at least two million blocks of stone, a block weighing two-and-a-half tons on an average. These pyramids exhibit a very high degree of architectural perfection. The design involved considerable precision in mathematical calculations. This was not just a matter of aesthetic appeal, but without such precision the buildings would not have been architecturally feasible. Given their weight, size and shape they would just have collapsed.

It has been estimated that it would have required the labour of at least 10,000 persons, working together, to build each pyramid. This labour was requisitioned when fields were flooded by the Nile and no agricultural activity could take place. The construction work stretched over several seasons. Some historians hold the view that the labour for pyramid construction was not forced labour but essentially a way of providing livelihood and sustenance to the peasants when agricultural work was slack. However, considering the harsh labour that went into this task there must have been a strong element of coercion in mobilizing a labour force for it. One should also keep in mind that engaging so many workers in pyramid building amounted to diverting a large labour force (mainly able-bodied adults) from economically productive activities. Even otherwise the construction of tombs on such a scale was a drain on the resources of Egypt. It is hardly surprising that the pyramid built by Mycernius (Menkure), the successor of Chephren, was architecturally inferior and much smaller in size (just 62 metres high and 108.4 square metres at the base). After Mycernius there was an overall decline in pyramid building. For a long time after the Fourth Dynasty the Egyptian economy could not afford such lavish monuments. Some major dynasties in later periods did build elaborate cemeteries but these were designed very differently and the emphasis shifted to making huge larger-than-life statues of the rulers.

The pyramids were principally buildings in which the dead bodies of respective pharaohs were buried. There was a significant ritual connected with the burial. This ritual was intended to enable the dead pharaoh to be reborn. A myth was invented according to which the life of the pharaoh did not completely cease with death. The pharaoh was supposed to possess an after-life. But this after-life (or life after death) had to be facilitated by performing some complex burial ceremonies. The most important part of the ceremony was the preservation of the dead body. The internal organs were removed and the body was embalmed by applying some

herbs and chemicals. It was then wrapped in bandage-like strips of cloth. This process is usually called 'mummification'. The mummified body was put in a chamber inside the pyramid (or other types of tombs) along with various objects connected with the dead pharaoh. A ritual boat was placed in the mausoleum to aid the passage to after-life.

The concept of the after-life of the pharaoh was linked to the Osiris myth, to which we have already made some reference above. The dead pharaoh was identified with Osiris, the god of the 'blessed' dead. Some more aspects of the myth might be mentioned over here. Osiris (Asar) was a widely worshipped deity in Egypt during the predynastic period. His cult was initially connected with agriculture. Osiris was regarded as the god of vegetation and was supposed have taught humans how to cultivate. It was believed that he had acquainted them with wheat, bread, and beer. The worship of Osiris seems to have become very popular in the delta region where Busiris became the main centre of this cult. There were many other centres of the cult as well, and during the dynastic period Abydos emerged its principal centre.

According to Egyptian mythology Osiris was a just and good king who ruled over the entire world. Osiris had a brother by the name of Set who was jealous of him. Set conspired to assassinate Osiris. His plan succeeded and Osiris was killed. Isis, the wife of Osiris, found the dead body of her husband and through her efforts he was reborn. After his rebirth, Osiris became the god of the blessed dead and ruled over the region of dead. Isis then gave birth to the posthumous son of Osiris. Horus was the son of Osiris and Isis. When Horus grew up he avenged the death of his father by killing Set. After the victory against Set, Horus occupied the throne of Osiris with the consent of the gods. All *ruling* pharaohs were identified with Horus. Horus had been originally linked to the worship of the falcon totem. The falcon eventually became the symbol of all pharaohs. They were always denoted by depicting a falcon. Thus each reigning pharaoh was believed to be Horus.

The divinity of Egyptian kings was asserted by identifying the living pharaoh with Horus and the dead pharaoh with Osiris. The myth of the rebirth of the pharaoh as Osiris helped to reinforce the notion that the king was immortal. All the rituals associated with the rebirth of the pharaoh have to be viewed in this context. The pyramids and other royal cemeteries had an ideological function. They were not the result of some peculiar Egyptian obsession with death and after-life. Had that been the case such burials would have been a universal feature in that society. However, the majority of the Egyptians were buried in very austere graves. The graves of the poor were narrow pits in which the dead body was placed in a crouching position in a very undignified manner.

The grand monuments built by the pharaohs were intended to overawe the people as well as to impress upon them that the pharaoh was no ordinary human being but a mighty god. It is not difficult to visualize the impact which the pyramids of Cheops and Chephren would have had on the people. The pyramids were not isolated structures. They were part of much larger complexes which contained temples where priests regularly performed rituals. The pyramid-complex of Chephren has additionally a large and very unusual piece of sculpture called the 'sphinx'. The sphinx is carved out of a single rock, and depicts a lion with the body of a human being. The head is a representation of the pharaoh Chephren. In order to promote the cult of the pharaoh the state expended immense resources on the maintenance of these temple-cum-burial complexes. From the Fourth Dynasty onwards the belief that pharaohs were gods remained firmly entrenched in the minds of the Egyptians.

The Egyptian state, and the ruling class which controlled it, was constantly engaged in perpetuating the cult of the pharaoh. This ruling class wielded enormous power which was derived to a large extent from the divine status of the pharaoh. We must remember that in the Old Kingdom a powerful centralized state came into existence in Egypt. It

is only a ruling class which is extremely confident of its ability to mobilize financial, technical and human resources on a very large scale that can undertake such an ambitious enterprise as the construction of the great pyramids. Nevertheless the demands made by the ruling elite on the productive resources of the country had become excessive by the end of the Fourth Dynasty. There was growing pressure on marginal areas which probably resulted in environmental degradation and declining productivity. This might have been one of the causes which led to the momentary breakdown of the centralized state at the end of the Old Kingdom.

By the Old Kingdom the Egyptian state had developed an extensive bureaucratic structure with wide ranging administrative functions. This bureaucracy carried out the systematic collection of tribute. Another major function of the bureaucracy was to organize and coordinate tasks related to irrigation. The overwhelming bulk of the tribute came from agriculture. Wheat, barley and flax (a kind of fibre used for making cloth) were the main crops. Besides, cattle rearing was an integral part of the agrarian economy. The produce of the peasants (*mertu* is a term frequently used for peasants in Egyptian documents) was appropriated in kind through a tax levied on them. This tax was called *mezed* and it included grain, bread, flax and animal hides. The *mertu* were also liable to *kat*, which implied forced labour either for the state (construction of pyramids etc.), or for digging and maintaining canals and dykes for irrigation. Artisans and craftsmen were generally bound to workshops attached to temples, palaces and houses of wealthy families. Although there were private traders, the state organized major trading expeditions especially for procuring metal, wood and luxury goods.

Every two years the government conducted a census for assessing cattle and to some extent land. This should not be confused with the modern concept of census, since it would have been based on a rough estimate of the resources of each province or *nome*. We do not know as to how efficient or

thorough the census was, but it was probably linked in some way to the system of taxation. The officer who was responsible for this biennial census enjoyed a prominent position in the state. The taxes collected in kind were stored in central granaries located in various parts of the country. Payments in kind were disbursed from the granaries. In the Archaic Period there were two separate treasuries for Upper and Lower Egypt: the treasury of Upper Egypt was designated as 'White House' and that of Lower Egypt as 'Red House'. In the Old Kingdom the treasuries were merged into one central treasury called 'Double White House'. The granaries were managed by the treasury, which also kept an account of receipts, payments, tribute, royal treasure and collection of flax and hides.

As centralized administration became more and more complex, the pharaohs began to appoint a chief minister to look after the day to day functioning of the government. The chief minister bore the title *taty* and was usually from the royal family. In the provinces the position of the *adj-mer*, who was initially responsible for irrigation works in the *nomes*, became increasingly powerful. The *adj-tner* was virtually the head of the provincial government, carried out the biennial census in *nomes*, and dispensed justice. At the lower levels of bureaucracy there were a large number of scribes who had been trained to read and write the hieroglyphic script and to draft various types of official documents. We can be certain that knowledge of the hieroglyphic script was confined to a very small section of society (officials, priests, scribes, and the aristocracy). The vast majority of the people were ignorant of the script.

Whereas the Egyptian state had evolved a fairly efficient system for centralized control, beyond a certain point centralization was difficult for a premodern state. In view of the historical limitations of a premodern state, the government in ancient Egypt had to rely on ancient village level institutions for routine local administration. We have references to village councils called *seh* (or *zazat*) in the Old Kingdom and *qenbet* during the Middle Kingdom. These

councils consisted of the *saru*—local notables and some scribes. In other words, the *saru* or members of these councils were drawn from among the dominant groups in the villages. The *seh* or *zazat* had probably existed in the predynastic period. The centralizing tendencies of the Egyptian state did not destroy these institutions. These councils now assisted the government in village administration. In the countryside, the *saru* became the main support base of the state and upheld the authority of the pharaoh.

IV

We have already observed that in the dynastic period the official religious ideology of Egypt revolved around the cult of the pharaoh. However, this cult developed relatively late and it incorporated several aspects of Egyptian religion which were much older (e.g. the worship of Osiris). The roots of Egyptian religion go back to the Amratian and Gerzean cultures, or even earlier. The first agricultural communities in Egypt worshipped mother-goddesses and had their own fertility cults. As these communities got organized into clans and tribes they adopted totems which symbolized respective clans/tribes. When the clans or tribes settled down in the Nile valley, they attached themselves to specific territories. The totems which were held sacred by clans or tribes residing in a particular area became the emblems of respective predynastic territorial units. Mother-goddess and fertility cults as well as worship of certain elements of nature (sun, barren desert) was prevalent.

As in the case of Mesopotamia, it is not possible to speak in terms of a single, uniform Egyptian religion. Even though Egypt was politically unified at a very early date, religious beliefs and practices exhibited great diversity. We must distinguish between state-sponsored religion, which tried to embrace the country as a whole, and the local cults which were confined to certain *nomes* or cities. At the popular level several primitive beliefs persisted. Wepwawet was a wolf

god associated with the Asyut *nome*, Khentiamentiu was a jackal god in Abydos and Sobek was a crocodile god in Thebes. All three might have been survivals of early totems. Egyptian religion kept evolving over centuries so that some cults were modified and transformed while others disappeared.

In the dynastic period there was a general decline in the importance of female deities and mother-goddess worship. In our discussion on Mesopotamia we have seen how this process was linked to the emergence of patriarchal society. Female deities either disappeared altogether or else were subordinated to male deities. In some cases they became consorts of prominent gods. Thus Isis was linked to Osiris as his wife. Similarly, a lion-headed goddess, called Sekhmat, became the consort of Ptah who was the main god of Memphis. Ptah was one of the gods who retained a large following throughout the dynastic period, even when Memphis ceased to be the capital. The worship of Ptah was popular within the educated elite as well as among artisans.

There was also a tendency to combine two or three deities in the form of a family. We have mentioned the Osirian family: Osiris-Isis-Horus as husband, wife and son. Another well known family was Ptah, Sekhmat (consort), and Nefertum (son). We can see the growing emphasis on the family as a social unit in the attempt to fuse separate cults in this manner. Another interesting characteristic of Egyptian religion was the existence of numerous deities which were represented as part animal (usually the head) and part human. Arsaphes was the ram-headed god of Heracleopolis; Sokar was a falcon-headed god worshipped in the Memphis region.

The most outstanding feature of Egyptian religion at the level of the state was the worship of the sun god. From the Third Dynasty the pharaohs patronized solar cults in some form or the other. The solar cult embraced other cults as well. In the Archaic Period the worship of Horus, represented as a falcon, became prominent though different religious beliefs were still contending for supremacy. Evidence from the reign

of Peribsen, the sixth ruler of the Second Dynasty, shows that there was a strong move to revive the worship of Set towards the end of the Archaic Period. As Emery has pointed out, at this stage Horus had not yet been fully integrated with the Osiris cult. It was in the Old Kingdom that the process of amalgamating Horus with the Osirian family and depicting Set as evil was completed. Simultaneously the sun god Re became the basis of official religion. A major source for information on the worship of Osiris and Re are the detailed religious texts inscribed inside pyramids. These are known as Pyramid Texts and the earliest belong to the Fifth Dynasty (c. 2300 BC). The Pyramid Texts are the oldest religious texts in the world.

The trend of royal worship of Re assumed significance under Djoser. Gradually a theology evolved whereby Re, Osiris, Horus and pharaohs were accommodated in the pantheon. According to the genealogy which was created, Osiris and Horus were regarded as having descended from the sun god Re. Thus the divine pharaoh was associated with Re as well as with Osiris and Horus. The worship of Re was fully established by the Fourth Dynasty. This cult maintained its preeminent position in Egyptian religion for over twenty-five centuries. Of course the actual manner in which Re was worshipped underwent several changes throughout this long period. ^

At different points of time Re was linked to separate deities. This was the direct outcome of political changes. As new groups rose to power they sought to project their own cults by combining them with the worship of Re. This was done by resorting to the device of converting a given local deity into a manifestation of Re. For instance Amon became Amon-Re, Atum became Atum-Re and Sobek became Sobek-Re. This formula was convenient for giving a more universal appeal to local deities.

We have mentioned that in Egypt the priests by and large did not directly wield much political authority. However they played a crucial ideological role in the political structure and in times of crisis their support could be vital. In the Old

Kingdom the priests of Heliopolis had acquired a special status. Heliopolis was located close to Memphis. Atum was the main god of the city. The Heliopolis priesthood successfully identified Atum with a much older deity, namely the sun god Re. Through this association they made Atum more widely acceptable. The Heliopolis priests consolidated their position by attaching themselves firmly to the state. The Atum-Re cult was the dominant cult of the Old Kingdom. When there was a prolonged era of political crisis after the Fourth Dynasty, and the authority of the pharaohs weakened, the Heliopolis priests became politically powerful. Under the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties the Heliopolis priesthood enlarged the scope of its authority.

The Old Kingdom came to an end with the collapse of the Sixth Dynasty. With the decline of the centralized state in the First Intermediate Period the Heliopolis priests and the Atum-Re cult suffered a setback. The focus shifted to some powerful *names*, which asserted their independence. Provincial governors became strong, and in Greek accounts such governors are referred to as *nomarchs*. Heracleopolis became one of the major new centres of power. With the rise of Heracleopolis, Arsaphes, the local god of the city became a leading deity of the Egyptian pantheon for some time.

When Egypt was once again unified under the Eleventh and Twelfth Dynasties the worship of Atum-Re was replaced by the worship of Amon-Re. In the Middle Kingdom the centre of political power moved to Thebes in Upper Egypt. The rulers of the Eleventh and Twelfth Dynasties came from Thebes. Amon was the main deity of Thebes. Re was now conceptualized as Amon-Re and it was in this form that the sun god was worshipped for most of the Middle and New Kingdoms. We also have references to Sobek-Re. We have noted that Sobek was a crocodile deity of Thebes.

From the Twelfth Dynasty the pharaoh was represented as being descended from Amon. The Amon cult became the foremost cult of the Egyptian state. This cult was so influential that when Amenhotep IV, one of the rulers of the

Eighteenth Dynasty, tried to break away from it by transferring the capital from Thebes to a new site called Akhet-aten where he established the worship of another deity (Aten), his move was short-lived. His successor once again made Thebes the capital of the empire and ensured the continued domination of Amon (or Amon-Re).

During the course of these changes, the Osirian cult was also modified. In the Old Kingdom only the pharaoh enjoyed the privilege of being reborn as Osiris. Later on, this privilege was extended to other members of the royal family and yet later to provincial governors, *nomarchs*, and the aristocracy. Several sections of the ruling class were allowed to perform the ritual for being reborn as Osiris. Correspondingly there seems to have been a decline in the importance of the Osiris cult in terms of promoting the divinity of the pharaoh. Though the Osiris cult remained very popular, its overall character was transformed after the Old Kingdom. One might comment here that by the end of the Fourth Dynasty the notion that the pharaoh was a god was ingrained in the minds of the Egyptians to such an extent that it was no longer necessary to rely on the Osirian myth to perpetuate the idea of the pharaoh's divinity and immortality. The remains of ancient Egyptian civilization, including the written texts which have survived, leave us in no doubt about the impressive accomplishments of the Egyptians in science and mathematics. The Greeks, who themselves made great advances in these fields, readily acknowledged their debt to the Egyptians. The Egyptians were not very good at theory but they were excellent observers and adept at working out practical solutions to problems in science and mathematics. The pyramids are the most noteworthy illustration of this.

Early Egyptian geometry and arithmetic was a response to the need to measure Nile floods and survey land for

irrigation or taxation. The official unit for length was a royal linear measure of 52.3 cm. This was used for measuring the level of water in the Nile and was employed from the Old Kingdom onwards. There was another linear measure which was employed for ordinary purposes. This was somewhat smaller than the royal unit.

The Egyptians had evolved symbols for representing numbers from one to nine. The concept of zero was unknown to them. They had separate symbols for numbers like ten, hundred, thousand and so on till one million. Their arithmetical calculations were mainly based on addition and subtraction. Knowledge of the properties of multiplication was very elementary. Multiplication involved a tedious method which was more like an extended form of addition. This was also true for division. The only numerator used by the Egyptians in their fractions was the number '1'. Therefore a fraction having a numerator larger than one had to be represented in a long repetitive manner: $\frac{3}{11}$ would be shown as $\frac{1}{11} + \frac{1}{11} + \frac{1}{11}$. To simplify this there were a few symbols for commonly used fractions, e.g., $\frac{2}{3}$ and $\frac{3}{4}$.

Despite these limitations, the Egyptians were exceptionally precise in their calculations. This is all the more remarkable when we realize that calculations on a scale as vast as that of the pyramids have to be exact. The smallest inaccuracy will tend to get enlarged manifold when the design is executed. Even in the modern computer age the designing of a true pyramidal structure, having the dimensions of the great pyramid of Cheops, would be a challenging job due to the numerous simultaneous calculations this would require. We know that the Egyptians used some of their astronomical observations to work out the alignment of the great pyramids. They were familiar with the relationship between the diameter of a circle and its area and estimated the value of π quite correctly.

Whereas it is generally recognized that the Egyptians did not on the whole make much progress in astronomy, they did devise a workable calendar. The length of a year was computed almost accurately. In the ancient Egyptian

calendar one year contained 365 days. The year was divided into 12 months of thirty days each. The beginning of the year corresponded to 19th July of our calendar. The five additional days were sacred days devoted to feasts. The discrepancy which would have been caused over a period of time by skipping one-fourth of a day annually was rectified through the system of reckoning the calendar afresh with the accession of a new pharaoh. The calendar of the previous pharaoh was abandoned. This meant that the error caused by the failure to add one day to the calendar in every four years, something that we do in every leap year, did not accumulate beyond a certain point. The discrepancy was thus kept within manageable limits.

The Egyptians were highly successful in preserving the human dead body. The art of mummification had been perfected by the Fourth Dynasty. Preservation of the dead body required a good understanding of human anatomy and of the basic principles of chemistry. This was a highly specialized job and the skill would have been acquired after a long period of training. Unfortunately the expertise which was developed for mummification did not lead to any breakthrough in medical science. The specialists who carried out the preservation of the dead body got a chance to learn much about human anatomy. This experience could not benefit medical science for the simple reason that medicine was normally the domain of priests who did not directly have anything to do with the actual process of preservation. Priests preferred to use magical charms and spells for curing illness. A great historical opportunity for the advancement of medicine was thereby lost.

Chapter Six

FROM BRONZE AGE TO IRON AGE: ANATOLIA AND GREECE

DURING the third millennium BC (between 3000 and 2000 BC) several bronze age cultures appeared in Anatolia, Greece and some other parts of the eastern Mediterranean zone. By 2000 BC, almost a thousand years after the birth of Sumerian and Egyptian civilizations, conditions were ripe for the emergence of new bronze age civilizations in this region. The historical development of Anatolian and eastern Mediterranean societies had reached a stage where they were ready for the transition to civilization. The presence of two great bronze age civilizations in this part of the world (Mesopotamia and Egypt) had a far-reaching effect on many of the neighbouring peoples, most of whom were at a relatively lower level of development. More important, however, were the internal changes which had been taking place in Anatolian and eastern Mediterranean societies over a long period of time. It is necessary to mention that an extensive trading network, in which a number of communities participated, had been established in this region.

A prominent feature of the second half of the millennium (after c. 2500 BC) was the movement and displacement of various tribes, including the group which we broadly refer to as the Indo-Europeans. For nearly 1500 years West Asia and the eastern Mediterranean witnessed a constant traffic

of innumerable tribes. The history of many of these tribes is obscure but their interaction and conflict with settled agrarian societies of the region was occasionally recorded in some form or the other. These records provide us with vital clues for understanding these tribal movements. Scholars have grouped these tribes on the basis of their language. Unfortunately this linguistic classification has at times been misrepresented to support racist interpretations of history. The languages of these tribes fall into two broad divisions: Indo-European and Semitic. There are a few linguistic groups which do not belong to either category. The prominent Semitic tribes were the Amorites of Syria, who contributed to the establishment of the Babylonian empire in Mesopotamia; and later on, the Canaanites in Syria and Palestine. A branch of the Canaanites, the Phoenicians, played a key role in the Mediterranean history. Among the Indo-Europeans there were Indo-Aryans, Nesians (Hittites), Greeks and Mitanni. Another group, known as the Hurrians, were a people settled in northern Iraq and Syria whose language had nothing in common with the Indo-Europeans or Semites. Afterwards we find an Indo-European segment within the Human population, the Mitanni. By c. 1500 BC the Mitanni had emerged as an aristocracy among the Hurrians. They worshipped Indra, Mithra and Varuna. The Mitanni are credited with having brought the art of horse training from their home in the Russian steppes. They popularized the horse in West Asia. Another tribe, the Kassites, who were probably of the same stock as the Mitanni, moved towards the Zagros mountains in northern Iraq. The incursions of the Kassites into southern Mesopotamia speeded up the overthrow of the Old Babylonian empire.

Anatolia (sometimes referred to as Asia Minor) is a vast rectangular area which roughly corresponds to the Asian part of modern Turkey. On the northern side it is bound by

the Black Sea and on the southern side by the Mediterranean. In the west it is enclosed by the Aegean Sea, in which many Greek islands are situated. Mainland Greece lies on the opposite shore of the Aegean Sea. In the south-western part of the Anatolian peninsula there is a major mountain range—the Taurus. The Taurus mountains separate Anatolia from northern Mesopotamia, Syria and the Lebanese coast. The central part of Anatolia is a high plateau. It may be recalled that southern Anatolia was part of the west Asian belt in which food production had its origins. We have referred to Cayonu where regular cultivation of plants was taking place c. 9500 BP, and the impressive neolithic settlement of Catal Huyuk. The large Catal Huyuk site, covering an area of nearly 32 hectares, can almost be described as a town (c. 7500 BP). Whereas settlements like Catal Huyuk had many of the ingredients necessary for an 'urban revolution' (trade, specialization, copperworking, large population), southern Anatolia was unable to make an early transition to the bronze age. Catal Huyuk declined after 7000 BP (5000 BC).

Evidence for the first Anatolian bronze age urban centres comes from Hissarlik in the north-western part of the peninsula, on the Aegean coast. Excavations have revealed that Hissarlik was the site of the famous city of Troy. The initial fortified settlement of Troy (Troy I) flourished between 3000 and 2500 BC. A few bronze age sites belonging to this period have also been found in central Anatolia at Alisar and Alaca Huyuk. Troy I was succeeded by a new, and more advanced, settlement—Troy II (2500-2200 BC). By this time social stratification was well defined. Exquisite gold ornaments and bronze weapons point towards a wealthy ruling class. Troy maintained trade contacts with other parts of West Asia and the eastern Mediterranean.

By c. 2500 BC a mature bronze age civilization had also developed in central Anatolia. This part of Anatolia was the home of a people who are known to history as 'Hatti' and were probably indigenous to the area. The language of the Hatti, called 'Hattic', does not resemble the structure of any

other Asian language. The Hatti laid the foundations of civilization in central Anatolia. Their civilization corresponds to the Middle Bronze Age of Anatolia (2500 to 1800 BC). Alaca Huyuk, where thirteen royal tombs have been discovered, was one of the centres of Hattian civilization. The prosperity of this civilization was closely linked to the role of Anatolia as a major supplier of metal. It should be remembered that Mesopotamia and Egypt were both deficient in copper. They had to depend on large imports of the metal. As these civilizations progressed, their demand for metal multiplied. Anatolia, on the other hand, had rich deposits of copper (as well as of gold and silver) which were being systematically exploited by 2000 BC. Around this time we find colonies of merchants in central Anatolia for the purpose of procuring metal. One such colony was at Kanesh (modern Kultepe), north of the Taurus mountains, where Mesopotamian traders bought and sold goods. Some of their business letters and account registers have survived and these offer us a glimpse of the trade. It is clear that the export of metal provided the Hatti with an opportunity to augment their own resources and thus to enrich their civilization.

The Hattian homeland was gradually occupied by a group belonging to the Indo-European linguistic family. Circa 2000 BC various Indo-European people penetrated Anatolia in the course of tribal migrations which were then taking place in southern Europe and western Asia. One of these Indo-European tribes, who have been identified as Nesians, eventually settled down in the land of the Hatti. The Nesians were outsiders to the area, but they soon became politically dominant. At the same time they borrowed many elements of Hattian civilization. This synthesis resulted in a new civilization which is familiar to us as the 'Hittite civilization'.

The Hittite civilization (1800 to 1200 BC) ranks as one of the great civilizations of West Asia, next in importance only to the Mesopotamian and Egyptian. The ample remains of this civilization include several thousand written texts,

mainly on clay tablets. The principal city of the Hittites was Hattusas (Boghazkoy). Hattusas was the capital of the Hittite empire for a long time. Archaeological excavations at Boghazkoy have brought to light Hittite buildings and fortifications. Several thousand documents have also been discovered. These have helped historians to reconstruct Hittite history in some detail. Interestingly it is possible to correlate this source material with contemporary evidence from Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Hittite chiefs began expanding their territory in central Anatolia from 1800 BC onwards. Lists of early Hittite kings are available but their chronology is doubtful. The Hittites made occasional forays into Mesopotamia and their raids were responsible for destroying the Babylonian empire (c. 1600 BC). Sometime after 1500 BC a new Hittite dynasty started ruling over most of Anatolia. The founder of this dynasty was Tudhaliyas II. One of the successors of Tudhaliyas II, named Suppiluliumas I, went on to create a mighty Hittite empire. Suppiluliumas I (1380- 1345) added northern Syria to the Hittite territories and subjugated the Hurrians. It was under Suppiluliumas that the Hittites became a great power.

His son, Mursilis II (1345-1315), continued with the task of conquest and consolidation. This brought him in conflict with the Egyptians who were then ruled by the Nineteenth Dynasty. Subsequently another Hittite ruler, Hattusilis III (1275-1250 BC), formed an alliance with Egypt. The pharaoh Ramesses II of the Nineteenth Dynasty established a close relationship with Hattusilis and married a Hittite princess. The basis of this alliance seems to have been the growing threat of invasions from Mesopotamia. The Hittite empire came to an end c. 1200 BC when Anatolia was invaded by some tribes who are referred to in contemporary records as 'people of the sea'.

As we have already noted, the Hittite civilization continued with many Hattian traditions. The Hattian concept of kingship influenced the evolution of Hittite monarchy. Hattian chiefs and kings were not absolute rulers

like the monarchs of Egypt or Mesopotamia. Hattian society retained a strong element of tribal political organization. This was reflected in the nature of Hittite monarchy wherein kings did not have unlimited authority. The king was not looked upon as a god and till very late in Hittite history he was not deified after death. The early Hittite state was essentially oligarchical and the king shared power with other warrior chieftains. It has been suggested that initially Hittite monarchy might have been elective and not based on the hereditary right to succession. We know that Hittite kings had to struggle hard to strengthen the monarchy and it was only during the reign of Suppiluliumas that the nature of kingship was fully transformed. Suppiluliumas enjoyed more extensive authority than his predecessors.

An important survival from the Hattian age was matrilineal social organization of which there are some traces in the Hittite period. In the Hattian political structure the right of succession was in the female line. This meant that the children of the ruling king's *sister* had the prerogative of inheriting the throne and various high offices. The king's sister bore the title *taxvananna*. The *tawananna* had substantial power. It was *her* son who had the right to become the ruler after the death of the reigning king, while her daughter would in turn inherit the title and authority of *tawananna*. This custom was also prevalent among the Hittites. In the Hittite period the *tawananna's* position remained very strong. Apart from her role in determining succession, she was the chief priestess. Certain taxes were specially reserved for the *tawananna* thereby making her financially independent.

The later Hittite rulers attempted to abolish this practice, which naturally led to conflicts over the question of succession. Finally Suppiluliumas altered the character of the *tawananna* system. He declared his queen as the *tawananna*. Thus from now onwards the queen, in her capacity as the wife of the ruling king, was the *tawananna*. The authority and privileges associated with this title were substantially reduced. The right of succession was no longer

with the *tawananna* but was vested in the king. This measure was one of the reforms undertaken by Suppiluliumas to strengthen the monarchy. It is worth noting that the *tawananna* tradition had endured for so long that it was not possible to completely do away with it. Even after this title was transferred from the king's sister to the queen, it carried with it certain religious functions. We hear of some queens who as *tawananna* had a lot of political influence. The best known example is that of Puduhepa, the wife of Hattusilis III. Puduhepa's diplomatic correspondence with Ramesses II has been preserved. This correspondence shows her in the role of an independent political figure.

Nevertheless it should not be thought that the institution of *tawananna* is an indication of the better status of women in Hittite society. Hittite society was rigidly patriarchal. This is the overall impression which we get from the law code of the Hittites. As in the case of Mesopotamia, the Hittites have also left a large collection of laws. Two sets of laws have been found on clay tablets among the Boghazkoy ruins. Each of these sets contains 100 clauses, i.e., in all we have 200 different Hittite laws. The laws cover a wide range of subjects including marriage, inheritance, punishments for offences, prices for certain goods and services, and economic matters. About twenty-five laws in the code pertain to marriage and related issues. Comparing the position of women reflected in these laws with their status in Hammurabi's code and other Mesopotamian laws, Gerda Lerner (in her work *The Creation of Patriarchy*) comments that Hittite laws 'are more restrictive of women than the other law codes'.

It is apparent from these laws that a social structure marked by sharp class distinctions existed in Anatolia under the Hittites. Slavery was well established. In the code there are provisions pertaining to slaves, including as many as six laws which deal with the marriage of a slave to a free person. The concept of punishment in the Hittite laws is somewhat different from that of Hammurabi's code. The underlying principle of retribution in Mesopotamian laws

was 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth', which implied that the punishment inflicted on an offender was the exact physical equivalent of the wrong which a victim had suffered. The Hittites laid greater emphasis on providing compensation to the aggrieved party rather than on punishment in terms of physical mutilation. Where the offender was a free person, he or she was usually required to adequately compensate the victim for the harm caused. Another advance made by the Hittite laws was that retribution was not merely a matter between the offender and the victim, but between the guilty person and the state. The intervention of the state was crucial in determining the precise quantum of punishment in many cases and it was not left to the two parties to settle the matter on their own.

Hittite religion incorporated several features of earlier Anatolian beliefs. On the one hand a number of cults centred around local deities flourished. These cults included various mother-goddesses. With the rise of patriarchal society many of the female deities disappeared or were subordinated to male gods. One of the most popular gods in Anatolia was the storm-god who was worshipped in different forms. The sun cult was widespread in the region. The sun was represented at times as a goddess and sometimes as a god. On the other hand the religion patronized by the Hittite state was mainly based on the worship of the storm-god Taru and the sun-goddess Arinna. Arinna was depicted as the wife of Taru in Hittite mythology. We can see the influence of Mesopotamian religion in the evolution of the Arinna cult. Arinna was identified with Ishtar. In Anatolia Ishtar was associated with fertility, war and the moon. The bull cult also occupied a prominent place in Hittite religion.

Mesopotamian civilization left a deep imprint on the Hittites. Hittite raids into Syria and Mesopotamia, as well as Mesopotamian trade links with Anatolia, introduced aspects of Mesopotamian civilization into the Hittite sphere of influence. Perhaps the most outstanding contribution of the Babylonians to the Hittites was the cuneiform script. At an early date Hittites had adapted the cuneiform script to

their language. Although the language spoken by the Hittite ruling class was Nesian (an Indo-European language), their official documents are invariably written in Akkadian.

Hittite military triumphs were facilitated by their use of the light horse-drawn chariot. Unlike the heavy Mesopotamian chariot with solid wheels, the Hittite chariot had spoked wheels. Incidentally this type of chariot was also used by the Egyptians. The main difference between the Hittite and Egyptian chariots was that the Hittite chariot carried three riders while the Egyptians put only two men on their war-chariots. A major treatise on the breeding and training of horses, belonging to the Hittite period, has survived. This gives us some idea about the importance of this animal, which was relatively new to Anatolia, in the Hittite military formations. It is generally believed that one of the causes of Hittite military superiority was the use of iron for making weapons, particularly swords. It was earlier suggested by scholars that iron technology was a Hittite military secret. As we shall see this view is no longer tenable, but it is possible that the Hittites might have been using iron to make some of their weapons.

II

We have seen that in West Asia, pre-pottery neolithic cultures began to develop after 10,500 BP. In Europe the transition to food production took place more than 2000 years later. The earliest neolithic cultures of Europe can be dated to the ninth millennium BP. In chapter three we referred to the beginnings of agriculture in south-eastern Europe, particularly Greece where evidence of one of the first European neolithic settlements has been found at the site of Argissa-Maghula (c. 8000 BP). The origins of food production in southern Europe remains a controversial issue. The consensus among prehistorians is that the European neolithic was the product of West Asian influences. This new pattern of subsistence spread to southeastern Europe—Aegean and Greece—from Anatolia. Either

migrants from Anatolia brought farming methods to Greece and the Aegean, or else the neolithic was gradually diffused (spread) from West Asia to south-eastern Europe.

Gordon Childe held the view that most of the critical achievements made during the prehistoric period, e.g. food production, pottery-making, metallurgy, urban revolution etc., first took place in West Asia and Egypt. From this region these advances were transmitted to other parts of the world by a process of 'diffusion'. Childe was of the opinion that every major breakthrough was a one-time occurrence in a particular area and subsequently the new knowledge or culture was disseminated among other people. According to him Europe had generally lagged behind in the development of the neolithic and the bronze age. Europe acquired knowledge of agriculture and metallurgy from West Asia. The path of diffusion was from West Asia to Anatolia; from Anatolia to the Aegean; from the Aegean to Greece and the Balkans; and from south-eastern Europe to other parts of the continent by different routes. This implied that there was always an interval in the process of diffusion from one point to another. The Aegean neolithic and bronze age developed later than in West Asia and these patterns of subsistence reached other parts of Europe even later. Childe's model is referred to as 'diffusionist'. He is, however, regarded as a 'moderate diffusionist' because he does not rule out the contributions of local cultures. There was no wholesale transfer of cultures from one place to another. Whereas people borrowed new techniques they also provided their own specific inputs, thereby introducing modifications. Some of these modifications were necessitated by the need to adapt to local conditions. This accounts for the distinctiveness of each culture. Despite diffusion there was considerable variation from one culture to another. Diffusion did not lead to the creation of exact replicas of the original culture.

Childe's diffusionist model dominated the study of European neolithic and bronze age societies for most of the twentieth century. Since the 1970s a few scholars have

challenged Childe's assumptions. Foremost among these prehistorians is Colin Renfrew, who is the leading critic of the diffusionist model. Renfrew has forcefully argued that European farming and metallurgy had independent origins, i.e., it was autochthonous (indigenous) and was not brought from outside. Renfrew's arguments were based on his interpretation of the new chronology which became available with radiocarbon dating (see chapter three, above). His contention was that revised dates contradicted the diffusionist explanation. These dates were much earlier than those worked out by Childe and other prehistorians. Renfrew rightly pointed out that Childe's major work had been published prior to the revolution brought about by the carbon-14 technique. With the modified chronological sequence it could now be demonstrated that there had been no significant time-lag in the occurrence of changes in Europe. Renfrew therefore ruled out the possibility of migrations or diffusion having been responsible for the shift to agriculture and copperworking. For him these were essentially European in origin.

Given the current status of archaeological finds it is not possible to agree with Renfrew's argument in its entirety. With regard to agriculture, as stated above, the overwhelming evidence points in the direction of diffusion or migration from West Asia to south-eastern Europe. Summing up the debate in the recently published UNESCO *History of Humanity* (Vol. I), S. J. De Laet observes that immigrants from Anatolia introduced domesticated plants and animals as well as pottery into Greece and the Aegean. He emphasizes the fact that the first plants to be cultivated in Europe—einkorn and emmer varieties of wheat—did not exist in their wild form in southern Europe. They must have been brought from West Asia and after undergoing some changes they were adapted to environmental conditions in different parts of Europe. It should however be borne in mind that during the mesolithic period some European societies had reached a stage of development where the transition to farming might just have been a matter of time.

Apart from Argissa-Maghula, other early neolithic sites in Greece include Sesklo and the Franchthi Cave. The pre-pottery neolithic Sesklo culture dates back to 5000 BC. Sesklo grew into a large village with a population of almost 3000 inhabitants. On the island of Crete archaeological excavations have brought to light successive layers of occupation by neolithic communities, going back to c. 6000-5500 BC. The first food producing societies of Greece, Crete and the Aegean cultivated wheat and barley and reared sheep and goats. They had learnt to make pottery of a very high standard.

While it is difficult to accept Renfrew's anti-diffusionist position in the case of European agriculture, the story of metallurgy is somewhat different. The history of the genesis of copperworking in Europe has been completely revised as a result of archaeological evidence that has accumulated since the 1960s and 1970s. The new picture which has emerged confirms Renfrew's view that European metallurgy was *not* derived from West Asia but had independent local origins. It now seems certain that the Balkan region of Europe had initiated the use of copper much before any part of the Aegean. This implies that Balkan metal technology was not borrowed from West Asia. The Balkans are situated at a much greater distance from Anatolia than the Aegean Sea. According to the diffusionist model metallurgy would have reached the Balkans and central Europe *after* it had spread to Greece and the Aegean. Since this is not the case, we can infer that European metallurgy was an independent tradition. As a matter of fact certain metallurgical techniques are of greater antiquity in Europe than in West Asia.

Native copper, or almost pure copper which was found in its natural state on the surface of the earth, was the source of the first metal objects made by humans. These were rocks which did not break or shatter like stone when they were repeatedly struck with force. Growing familiarity with the properties of native copper showed that it was different from other types of stone. It could be beaten into various shapes through constant hammering. Copper was used in

Anatolia c. 6000 BC (Catal Huyuk) for making small ornaments. A little later, copper objects were being made in northern Iraq and Iran. By c. 5000 BC there is evidence of copperworking from Vinca (Yugoslavia) and Varna (Bulgaria) in the Balkans. Initially the Yugoslavian and Bulgarian metal objects were made by cold hammering of native copper. Soon the Balkans had progressed to the stage of smelting copper. In West Asia the technique of smelting probably came into use somewhat later. The earliest evidence pertaining to smelting of copper ore found in West Asia is from the site of Tepe Yahya (3800 BC). This process involved heating the rocks for removing impurities and then beating the copper into the required shape.

The ovens employed in the Balkans for manufacturing pottery were sufficiently advanced to be adapted for purposes of metallurgy. We have already referred to the close technological link between pottery-making and copper smelting. Significantly the oldest copper mines known to us are located in Yugoslavia (Rudna Glava) and Bulgaria (Aibunar). The production of copper by smelting ores extracted from mines was another major step forward in the development of metallurgy. The prehistoric metal specialists of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria made copper ornaments and tools of outstanding workmanship. Incidentally their gold objects—among the earliest artifacts of this metal—also exhibit a high level of skill. Unfortunately we do not have much information about other aspects of these cultures except that they traded in the metal goods manufactured by them.

In Greece and the Aegean the copper age developed around 3500 BC. Sometime after 3000 BC copper was being alloyed with tin (or arsenic) to produce bronze throughout West Asia, Greece and the Balkans. The Egyptians mastered the technique of making bronze much later than Anatolia and the Aegean. During the latter half of the third millennium BC bronze age cultures were evolving on the island of Crete. This large rectangular island in the eastern Mediterranean marks the southern boundary of Greece and

the Aegean Sea. Circa 2000 BC it became the home of a brilliant bronze age civilization—the Minoan civilization.

III

The Minoan civilization can be described as the first European bronze age civilization. In the periodization of ancient Greece the first phase of the urban revolution may be regarded as having commenced with the Minoans. This civilization was unknown till the early twentieth century when diggings conducted by Sir Arthur Evans brought it to light. Evans named the civilization after the legendary king Minos who is associated with Crete in Greek mythology. We still know nothing about the political history of the Minoans, but remains of several Minoan cities have been found in Crete. The most exciting discovery has been at Knossos.

By c. 2000 BC the bronze age had attained maturity in Crete. Around this date the urban revolution had been completed and a number of prominent cities had developed on the island: Knossos, Phaistos, and Mallia. These cities contained large palace complexes. The palace of Knossos is the most well known and represents a remarkable artistic achievement. The Minoan palaces were designed architecturally with great care to make them pleasing to the eye. The walls were decorated with frescoes (paintings or designs made while the plaster on the walls was still wet). The palaces had large store-rooms and workshops. However they were not fortified. This would indicate that Minoan society was internally very stable. The ruling class relied on force only to a limited extent. Moreover, the lack of defensive walls shows that the Minoans had sufficient naval strength to deal effectively with external aggression. Their navy was also capable of resisting attacks by pirates.

The Minoan civilization reached its climax in the period 2000-1600 BC. Minoan products like vases and jewellery are typical of these people. The aesthetic sensibility of this civilization was distinctively Minoan and it was quite unlike what we encounter in contemporary eastern Mediterranean

and West Asian cultures. Minoan art was marked by great delicacy and warmth. In selecting themes for drawings their emphasis was on scenes from nature or from everyday life: It is not surprising that Minoan products were much sought after.

The emergence of Minoan civilization coincided with the quickening of trade contacts in the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean. A glance at a map of the region will show the strategic location of the island of Crete. The Minoans exploited their favourable location to create a vast trading network. It will be correct to say that long distance seaborne trade and exchange was the mainstay of the Minoan economy. Minoan ships traded with Egypt, Anatolia, the Lebanese coast, Cyprus and the Aegean. Traders from Crete carried wool, textiles, perfumed oil, jewellery, and vases to various parts of the Mediterranean.

The Minoan cities and port-towns were integrated with the agrarian economy of the Cretan countryside. Goods were brought from the rural areas to the cities for exchange and redistribution. The palace complexes played an important role in this process. It has been suggested that the Minoan palaces were not merely centres of political authority or residences of the Minoan aristocracy. These complexes were engaged in regulating economic activities over a wide area. Goods would be taken to the palaces for storage, processing, redistribution and overseas trade.

Sheep-rearing and wool production were vital components of the Minoan rural economy. Further, in addition to wheat cultivation there were two new staples of Minoan agriculture: olives and grapes (vine). Olive and vine became the qualitatively novel feature of farming under Mediterranean soil and climatic conditions. Together with wheat, olive and vine were soon established as the three main crops of Greece and Rome. The olive is a small fruit which grows on trees. This fruit is processed mainly for its excellent oil. Vines are climbing plants which yield grapes. Grapes are the main source of wine production. One advantage of concentrating on cultivation of olive and vine

is that they can be grown in areas where flat arable land is scarce. It should be kept in mind that Greece and the Aegean islands do not possess vast fertile plains. There is a shortage of level agricultural fields and most of the plots tend to be small. It therefore makes sense to combine the cultivation of wheat and other cereals with olive and vine as these do not compete for space. At the same time this pattern of farming necessitates more exchange because olive, wine and wool cannot be staples of the diet. The palace complexes facilitated these exchanges and were centres for the production of oil, wine and textiles.

The Minoans had developed writing, mainly for the purpose of maintaining lists of goods. Initially their symbols were modified pictures. They then evolved a script which has been named 'Linear A'. We do not know the language of the Linear A script. This script remains undeciphered, but the surviving records are probably related to trade and exchange. Another script was also in use in Crete. This third script is called 'Linear B'. This has been found mainly on tablets of unbaked clay. At some point of time the 'Linear B' script was transferred to an early form of Greek. We will discuss this script in some more detail a little later.

The Minoan civilization suddenly came to an end c. 1400 BC. Invasions from mainland Greece contributed to the decline of the Minoans. In order to properly understand this development we must refer to the emergence of a new bronze age civilization in Greece—the Mycenaean civilization.

IV

While the foundations of Minoan civilization were being laid in Crete, continental Greece was being occupied by groups of Indo-European people who spoke an early form of Greek, or a proto-Greek language. At the outset of this chapter we mentioned waves of migrations by Indo-European tribes, especially after c. 2500 BC. Some of these tribes had entered Greece and settled down there between 2200 and 2000 BC.

These tribes eventually produced a major bronze age civilization known as the Mycenaean civilization. As fresh waves of migrants penetrated the area the Greek language evolved further and Greek speaking communities began to dominate most of mainland Greece.

The Mycenaean civilization (c. 1600-1200 BC) was discovered in the late nineteenth century through the efforts of Heinrich Schliemann. Besides his work at Mycenae, Schliemann had pioneered excavations at Troy. This civilization—the first bronze age civilization on mainland Greece—is named after the site of Mycenae. Mycenae (the Greek name is Mykene or Mykenai; Mycenae is the latinized form) is situated in the southern part of mainland Greece, near Corinth. According to legend it was supposed to have been founded by Perseus. Other major Mycenaean sites are Tiryns and Pylos. Large workshops for producing bronze objects and textiles have been found at the palace of Pylos.

The Mycenaens borrowed many elements of Minoan civilization, including the system of centralized redistribution and the Linear B script. The Mycenaens had an extensive foreign trade. Oil, pottery and textiles were their main exports. They imported gold, copper and tin. But the overall character of the Mycenaean civilization was quite different from the Minoan. When we speak of the Mycenaens we are actually referring to independent states ruled over by warrior chiefs. These chiefs, who usually had the title *wanax* or *anax*, ruled over their territories from fortified urban centres. Unlike the Minoan palace complexes, which were not fortified, the Mycenaean cities were dominated by strong fortresses. The citadels of the *wanax* were the nucleus of Mycenaean urban centres. The Mycenaean states were governed by a powerful warrior aristocracy. The warriors were constantly engaged in a violent struggle with their neighbours to enlarge their domains. This civilization is sometimes called a 'warrior civilization'. The wealthy Mycenaean chiefs were buried in beehive shaped tombs (*tholoi*) or in large chamber tombs. In addition to Mycenae, some of the other states were Pylos,

Thebes and Orchomenos. The Mycenaeans took over most of Crete and established their states on the island. Knossos was the centre of one of these states.

The Mycenaean civilization lasted till c. 1200 BC. This was the time when the Hittite civilization also came to an end. Another round of tribal migrations coincided with the simultaneous collapse of bronze age civilizations in the eastern Mediterranean by 1200 BC. Egypt and Mesopotamia were also undergoing a period of crisis. In the traditional periodization of ancient Greek history the four centuries from 1200 to 800 BC are denoted as the 'dark ages'. Mycenaean cities went into decline, the Linear B script disappeared and trade was disrupted. Source material for this period is rather scanty. Hence the use of the term 'dark ages' to describe this period.

The 'dark ages' of Greece are supposed to have come to an end c. 800/750 BC when two great Greek epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, were written. These epics mark a turning point in Greek history. Their composition is attributed to a poet by the name of Homer. The historicity of Homer has not been confirmed. Nor is it certain that the author of both the epics was the same person. What is relevant for our purpose is that they are a very rich historical source. With the composition of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* written records are once again available for ancient Greece, after a gap of nearly four hundred years.

These two works are part of the tradition of epic poetry. *Iliad* is a long poem of nearly 16,000 lines. *Odyssey* is a slightly shorter poem of about 12,000 lines. The main theme of *Iliad* is the war of a coalition of Greek states against the state of Troy. The members of this coalition are collectively called 'Achaians' in the epics. According to the story a number of Greek states, led by Agamemnon (ruler of Mycenae), carried out a ten-year long campaign against the city of Troy. *Iliad* presents a detailed account of the last few days of the Trojan war. *Odyssey* recounts the adventures of one of the heroes of the war—Odysseus—on his homeward journey after the conclusion of the campaign. In the course

of these narratives almost every aspect of society, economy, religion, mythology, beliefs, and food habits is touched upon.

It was generally believed that *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were inspired by events which had taken place in the Mycenaean age. There can be no doubt that some of the stories in these epics are derived from the period when the Mycenaean civilization flourished. There is awareness of an earlier era in which great heroes, kings and warriors lived. It was thought that the Homeric epics were essentially a portrayal of Mycenaean society. The reinterpretation of these poems, particularly in the light of more exhaustive archaeological evidence, has allowed scholars to view *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as works of the later 'dark ages'.

Whereas the legends contained in the epics might have had their origin in the Mycenaean age, these legends would have been transformed in the process of being handed down orally from generation to generation. Some features would have been added and some would have been lost in the process of retelling tales of the heroic deeds of the Mycenaean. The tradition of epic poetry was a form of entertainment. Bards or poets composed and recited the poems before an audience, selecting stories with which the listeners were familiar. We cannot rule out the possibility of some of the stories being based on real events. In any case around 800 BC someone composed or compiled many of the legends which were in circulation and wrote them down in the form of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Since they were composed towards the end of the 'dark ages' the actual details of everyday life relate to that period.

We find that the so-called 'dark ages' were not so dark after all. The period from 1200 to 800 BC can be divided into two subperiods: i) 1200 to 1050 BC and ii) 1050 to 800 BC. In the first subperiod centres of Mycenaean power were overrun by tribal invaders. Urban habitations disintegrated and the development of writing received a setback. From 1050 BC onwards there were some signs of recovery. Greek speaking people occupied the whole of continental Greece

and colonized the Aegean Sea. The Aegean islands and the western coast of Anatolia was incorporated in the Greek linguistic zone. With Greek speaking communities settled in Crete, mainland Greece, the Aegean and the coastal portion of western Anatolia this entire area was culturally unified. The major Greek dialects evolved in this period. There were three important dialects: Ionic, which included the subdialect Attic spoken in Athens; Doric; and Aeolic. The Homeric epics were written in a form of Ionic.

In the 'dark ages' the Greeks were politically divided into a large number of petty-states. These states were ruled by kings or chiefs with limited authority. There might have been a couple of powerful kings, but during the latter half of the 'dark ages' the overall trend was in the direction of weakening of monarchical control. The great heroes of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are in fact warrior chieftains ruling over small principalities. It is apparent that their authority is not supreme within the respective communities to which they belong. These chiefs often have to share political power with other members of the warrior aristocracy. The oligarchical political structure which became widespread in Greece after the 'dark ages' had its roots in these traditions.

The *Odyssey* provides an insight into the kind political system which emerged in Greece after c. 1000 BC. Odysseus, the hero of this epic, is capable of performing superhuman feats of strength and bravery. He is depicted as a mighty warrior who is feared throughout Greece. But his own position is quite insecure in the kingdom over which he rules. The epic shows Odysseus as the ruler of the tiny principality of Ithaca. While he is away on the Trojan campaign his family is constantly harassed. Rival clan leaders take advantage of his long absence to try usurping his power. If we closely examine the status of Odysseus we find that he is nothing more than a petty warrior chieftain who has to constantly struggle to retain his position. We may add over here that the excavations at Troy revealed that most of the Greek kings of the later 'dark ages' ruled over territories with meagre resources. The fabled city of Troy

turned out to be a big disappointment. In the words of M. I. Finley (*The World of Odysseus*) the Troy settlement which corresponds to the period of the *Iliad*, Troy VII, was a 'pitiful poverty-stricken little place, with no treasure, without any large or imposing buildings, with nothing remotely resembling a palace'. The Greek rulers of the 'dark ages' therefore frequently carried out raiding expeditions to obtain booty and the Trojan war (if it actually took place) was one such incident.

The end of the 'dark ages' saw the revival of writing in Greece. After 1200 BC the Linear B script used by the Mycenaeans was abandoned. For several centuries till the Homeric age there are no written records. It is possible that the disruption of trade following the decline of the Mycenaeans made writing irrelevant. This is all the more likely because the Linear B tablets mainly contain accounts and inventories. When the Greeks again began using a script towards the end of the 'dark ages' it was not the same as that employed by the Mycenaeans. The new script was borrowed from the Phoenicians. The Phoenicians, as we have noted, were a Semitic people who were a branch of the Canaanites.

The Phoenicians had their roots in trading settlements along the Lebanese coast at Tyre, Sidon, Byblos, and Ugarit. Apart from their lasting contribution to human civilization in developing an alphabet, the Phoenicians were catalysts for promoting exchanges in the Mediterranean. From c. 1000 BC they set up trading settlements throughout the eastern Mediterranean and subsequently in the western Mediterranean. Apart from becoming the leading middlemen of the Mediterranean they also produced certain commodities like glass and a type of purple dye. In the ninth century BC the Phoenicians founded the settlement of Carthage in north Africa (modern Tunisia). Carthage was to become the leading political power in the western Mediterranean. The Romans had to wage a long struggle for over a century to destroy the Carthaginian empire of the Phoenicians. This empire lasted till 200 BC.

The Phoenicians had evolved a script (c. 1500 BC) which suited their need to maintain accounts. This was a purely phonetic script in which the symbols stood for different sounds, i.e., it was an alphabetic script. There were 22 symbols in the Phoenician alphabet. The Phoenician script had symbols only for consonants. It was written from right to left (Linear B was written from left to right). The Greeks took over the Phoenician script and modified it by adding symbols for vowels. The Homeric epics were written in the new Greek alphabet.

The most important achievement of the later 'dark ages' was the shift from bronze to iron. Between 1050 and 800 BC iron technology was disseminated in Greece and the Aegean. This period marks the transition to the iron age. The origins of iron technology are shrouded in mystery. However the archaeological evidence which has accumulated over the years indicates that Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia pioneered the use of this metal. The technology involved in making iron objects is much more complex than that of copper or bronze. It took some time to acquire proficiency in ironmaking. In West Asia and the eastern Mediterranean the introduction of iron was spread over many centuries, from the fifteenth to the eighth centuries BC.

It is not possible to pinpoint one particular place where the technology was 'invented'. It was earlier thought that the Hittites were the first people to use iron extensively, especially for military purposes, and that they kept this technology a closely guarded secret. The collapse of the Hittite empire c. 1200 BC and the tribal movements in Anatolia and the eastern Mediterranean resulted in the transmission of iron techniques to new areas. Scholars no longer hold the view that the Hittites had a monopoly of this technology or that migrations by tribal groups carried knowledge of ironworking to new areas. We know that iron was not completely unknown to West Asians, Egyptians and

the eastern Mediterranean world prior to 1200 BC. Some familiarity with this metal had definitely been acquired between 2000 and 1500 BC. A handful of small iron objects or fragments of the metal have been found at various sites spread over a wide belt in West Asia. After 1500 BC iron objects, though still rare, exhibit improved metallurgical skills. An outstanding example is a dagger with an iron blade buried with the remains of the pharaoh Tutankhamen (1350 BC).

Although there is still a lot of difference of opinion among historians over the question of whether copper and bronze technology could have directly led to ironmaking, it cannot be denied that copper and bronze metallurgy led to advances in pyrotechnology (the technology of regulating fire and heat; attaining/controlling high temperatures in furnaces) which in turn facilitated the transition to iron. On the other hand unlike copper and bronze, ironmaking involves a number of complicated steps. Moreover, there is considerable room for variations at each step so that we come across diverse techniques being applied to iron production. It would be wrong to assume that there was a uniform method which was adopted throughout West Asia. Different cultures made the transition to iron by traversing their own specific technological paths.

Iron invariably occurs in an impure form. It has to be extracted from ores. There are several types of iron ores with varying quantities of iron. Haematite and magnetite ores contain the highest percentages of iron, but depending on availability other ores with much lower iron content are also used to produce the metal. For extracting iron the ore should ideally be heated to over 1500 °C so that the iron melts and can then be drawn off. The melting point of iron is 1540 °C, which is much higher than that of copper (about 1100 °C). Initially it was not possible to have furnaces where temperatures of over 1500 °C could be obtained. Nevertheless it is technically possible to procure small quantities of somewhat impure iron even at much lower temperatures. Two further processes are necessary to make

the iron economically useful. These two processes are carburization and tempering. When iron is brought in contact with carbon while it is hot it undergoes physical changes to become steel. Tempering refers to fast cooling of the iron which has absorbed carbon. Carburization and tempering enable iron to acquire hardness and strength. This renders it a superior metal for manufacturing tools and weapons.

Ancient metallurgists discovered that carbon was added to iron when the metal was heated in the presence of burning charcoal. But it was only gradually that this method became popular. One of the constraints of iron technology was the need to have access to large quantities of fuel. As much as eight tons of charcoal would have been required for carburizing one ton of iron. Anatolia and Syria had adequate supplies of iron ores and fuel and the original breakthrough in carburization might have been made in this region c. 1200 BC. It was after 1200 that the new technology spread to the eastern Mediterranean. By 1000 BC carburized iron was being widely used in Greece.

Gordon Childe has labelled iron as a 'democratic' metal. This is because unlike copper, iron ores are well distributed throughout the world. The raw material could usually be procured locally and it was not necessary to rely on an elaborate trade network to obtain the ores. This is the reason for the cheapness of the metal as compared to copper and bronze. Once the technology was in place more people would have had access to iron. It is in this sense that Childe calls it a democratic metal.

It is not difficult to explain the rapid advance of iron in Greece. For making bronze the Greeks had to depend wholly on imports for their supplies of copper and tin. The decline of eastern Mediterranean trade after 1200 BC created problems for Greek metallurgy because the supply of copper and tin could not be maintained. The introduction of iron offered a viable alternative. Since Greece had its own iron ore deposits the Greek states with their limited resources would have preferred to use this metal rather than exchange

their small surpluses for imported copper and tin. Within a short time iron demonstrated its tremendous advantages as a metal. Apart from its cheapness it could be given stronger and sharper edges for making tools and weapons. Iron was much more suitable for making swords than bronze. Iron axes were also more effective as were agricultural implements like iron ploughs. It should not be assumed that iron immediately ousted copper and bronze. The adoption of iron was a slow process in Mesopotamia and Egypt. In Mesopotamia the iron age began after 800 BC and in Egypt more than a century later. In most of West Asia iron and bronze existed side by side for a long time. But in the context of Greece this new technology became one of the factors which contributed to the development of productive forces after 800 BC.

Chapter Seven

ARCHAIC AND CLASSICAL GREECE

THE foundations of classical Greek civilization were laid in the Archaic Period (c. 750-500 BC). The classical age, the glorious era of Greek civilization, lasted from c. 500 BC to the establishment of Macedonian supremacy over Greece in 338 BC. In the previous chapter we saw that when the Homeric epics were written Greece was a conglomeration of numerous independent states. The common bond between these states was the Greek language and some shared beliefs and myths. There was no such thing as a politically unified Greek state till the Macedonian conquest in the fourth century BC. For a long time the Greeks did not even have a collective name to describe themselves. In *Iliad* and *Odyssey* various terms are used. The people who formed the coalition against Troy are frequently called Achaeans (see chapter six). Eventually the word 'Hellene' came to denote the Greek speaking people. The Greek speaking communities collectively called themselves 'Hellenes' and the territory inhabited by them was known as 'Hellas' (even today the official name of the country, in the Greek language, is Hellas). Later on, the Romans designated them as 'Graeci'. This name became popular in other parts of Europe and it is from 'Graeci' that the appellation 'Greek' is derived.

Greece proper is an irregularly shaped peninsula in south-eastern Europe. It is surrounded by the Aegean Sea

in the east, by the Ionian Sea in the west and by the Mediterranean sea in the south. The southernmost part of mainland Greece is a palm-shaped extension into the Mediterranean, called the Peloponnese. Sparta was the most important state in the Peloponnese. The Peloponnese, which is virtually an island, is separated from the rest of mainland Greece by the Gulf of Corinth. A narrow strip of land in the north-eastern corner of the Peloponnese connects the two parts. Corinth is situated strategically at the junction of the Peloponnese and continental Greece. Megara was another well known state located on the strip of land joining the Peloponnese with the mainland. Beyond the Gulf of Corinth, at the south-eastern extremity of continental Greece, lies the region of Attica. Athens is located in Attica. To the immediate north-west of Attica is an area called Boeotia (central Greece). Thebes was the dominant city of Boeotia. Further north, along the Aegean coast, is the region of Thessaly. Thessaly is endowed with open plains which are suited for cultivating wheat and rearing cattle. The extremes of climate in Thessaly make olive and vine cultivation difficult in this area.

Moving in a clockwise direction from Thessaly we come to Macedonia, Thrace and the western coast of Anatolia. Macedonia (the home of Alexander the Great) is now shared between Greece, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. This region too has extensive plains and was renowned for its horses. Thrace, part of which is now included in the European part of Turkey, is the easternmost part of southern Europe. Thrace was a relatively backward area as compared to southern Greece but it was endowed with silver and gold mines. The western coast of Anatolia had several Greek states. The Greek speaking inhabitants of Anatolia and the islands in the eastern Aegean Sea were referred to as Eastern Greeks. In the Aegean Sea itself there are a large number of islands of varying sizes. There is a group concentrated in the southern Aegean. The islands of this group are collectively called the Cyclades. Crete is situated south of the Peloponnese and the Cyclades. In the process of their

expansion, the Greeks had colonized some areas of southern Italy and Sicily. The Greek settlements of southern Italy and Sicily are together known as Western Greeks.

The Greek states which had emerged at the end of the 'dark ages' may be described as city-states, although it would be more appropriate to use the term *polls* which the Greeks themselves used for these political formations. *Polls* indicates not merely the territory but the system of governance which prevailed in these states. The nucleus of the *polis* was an urban centre, but there were variations in levels of urbanization. The *polls* included the city and the neighbouring countryside and as a historical phenomenon should not be confused with the later Italian city-states. Unlike the Italian city-states which derived the bulk of their wealth from trade and commerce, the economic basis of the *polls* was essentially agrarian. The distinctive feature of the *polis* as a political unit was its relatively small size and the high level of participation by large sections of the population in the political process.

I

The Archaic Period witnessed a prolonged struggle between the landed aristocracy and the peasantry throughout Greece. The genesis of this struggle goes back to the later 'dark ages' when historical changes had placed landowning aristocrats in a strong position. The ruling class of the Mycenaean states was composed of the king, the priests, the bureaucrats, and the warrior aristocracy. Tribal movements and the decline of trade had led to the collapse of the Mycenaean social and political structure after 1200 BC. The system of production and redistribution under the supervision of the palaces broke down. The bureaucracy which organized this system lost its control.

Subsequently in many of the Mycenaean states the kings were forced to surrender some of their privileges to powerful clan chiefs and landed aristocrats. Given the small surpluses that many of the Greek states produced, these rulers were not in a position to find

resources for maintaining large armies to strengthen their authority, to defend their territory and to carry out raids for plunder. They had to rely on the support of the clan chiefs and big landowners to mobilize adult males for military campaigns. By the beginning of the Archaic Period the institution of monarchy had been considerably weakened in Greece. Effective power was passing into the hands of oligarchies (government by a small group of people, in this case aristocrats).

We are not very certain about what exactly happened during the 'dark ages', but it is possible to say with some confidence that after 1000 BC kingship as a form of government was gradually replaced by oligarchical rule of the landed aristocracy in many of the Greek states. By the beginning of the Archaic Period, older clan and tribal ties had further weakened and no longer played an important role in the socio-economic structure. Scholars have identified another institution—the *oikos*—as being the basis of social organization and production during the later 'dark ages'. The *oikos* was the main social unit, and may roughly be translated as 'household'. The *oikos* was simultaneously an economic unit (the word 'economy' is derived from *oikos*). The *oikos* referred to a family, its property, its belongings and all those who were engaged in working for the household. The last category included domestic servants, labourers working in the fields belonging to the *oikos*, and slaves. The *oikos* of the aristocracy would additionally have a number of retainers. Just as we can have rich households and poor households, so also at one end of the scale were the *oikos* of the aristocracy, and at the other end were the *oikos* of the small peasantry comprising the majority of the *oikos* of the community.

The *oikos* was a social unit and at the same time a production unit. It comprised both the people and the goods of the household. The core of the *oikos* was the family. Besides the members of the family, there were other members of the *oikos* who were not directly related to the family. They were dependent upon the *oikos* for their

livelihood and in return they provided their labour to the *oikos*. The *oikos* was strictly patriarchal and the head of the family, who was also head of the *oikos*, exercised unlimited authority over all the members. Complete loyalty and obedience was expected from them.

The *oikos* tended to be a self-sufficient production and consumption unit. Its economic activities were primarily centred around land. The aim of the *oikos* was to maximize output from scarce arable land. The better off landowners seem to have been quite successful at this towards the end of the 'dark ages'. The big landowners were better placed to augment their yield due to the extra labour (free and unfree) at their disposal. In addition to the resources of their *oikoi*, the aristocrats used their political position to acquire more land at the expense of the small landowners. Moreover, by having access to retainers they could participate in raiding expeditions and increase their wealth by appropriating large snares of the booty. At the beginning of the Archaic Period the heads of the richest *oikoi* had become a close-knit hereditary elite. It was this elite that dominated the oligarchical political structures of those Greek states in which monarchy had been eliminated or pushed into the background.

From c. 750 to 600 BC the landed aristocracy consolidated its hold over land. This led to the impoverishment of small landholders. In their desperation the small landholders put up a tough fight against the aristocracy. The constant upheavals caused by this struggle reached a point of crisis c. 600 BC. Sections of the aristocracy finally realized that unless some solution was found to this state of affairs their own prosperity would be threatened. Consequently they were forced to initiate reforms which incorporated concessions to the peasants.

The plight of the peasantry can be glimpsed from contemporary writings. Greek literature of the eighth century BC is no longer preoccupied with the exploits of warrior heroes but focuses on the everyday life of the ordinary peasant. This shift can be seen in the theme of the

major literary work of the early Archaic Period, Hesiod's *Works and Days*. Hesiod was a Greek poet from Boeotia. He was born near Thebes. Two of his writings have survived: *Works and Days* and *Theogony*. The nature of these poems is very different from the epic poetry of the Homeric age. *Works and Days* is concerned with the routine of the farmer. This long poem contains details about the agricultural cycle and gives advice to the peasant on how to cultivate the land efficiently. Hesiod expresses an intense dislike for the rich landowners and describes the toil and hard work of the small peasant.

The resistance put up by the impoverished peasants of Greece made it difficult for the aristocracy to ignore the demands of this class. They had to take some steps to improve the conditions of the peasants for reducing tensions in society. We have a fairly detailed account of the reforms undertaken at Athens. These give us some idea about the developments which took place during the latter half of the Archaic Period. The information on Athens is supplemented by references to other *poleis* which indicate that similar processes were at work elsewhere too. It needs to be kept in mind that monarchy had been abolished at Athens in 752 BC. At the beginning of the Archaic Period the term frequently used for kings was *basileus*. In many Greek states the *basileus* was either removed or divested of authority. Hereditary monarchy with absolute power was no longer the norm. At Athens the government was placed under officials called archons. The archons were chosen from among the aristocracy.

Once they had established their control over the Athenian state the aristocrats increased the burden on the small landholders. They occupied the most fertile land and pushed the peasants to marginal areas. The aristocracy sought to exploit the labour of the peasants by exerting pressure on them to work on their estates. Impoverished peasants often had to take loans from wealthy landowners, many of whom were engaged in trade and moneylending. When the poor peasants failed to pay their debts they,

along with their families, were forced into bondage. Not only were the peasants being deprived of their land but they were being reduced to the status of slaves. The worsening condition of the small landholders provoked a widespread reaction. Athens was almost in a permanent state of unrest which the aristocracy was unable to suppress. Contemporaries referred to this situation as *stasis*, or stalemate. The principal demands of the peasantry were redistribution of land and abolition of debt bondage. When the discontent tended to go out of control a section of the aristocracy proposed some reforms. In 594 BC the Athenians resorted to the device of appointing an arbitrator, named Solon, to carry out these reforms. With the agreement of both sides Solon was to have dictatorial powers for a specified duration. The sweeping powers of the arbitrator gave him a free hand to deal with the crisis.

The most radical reform of Solon was the abolition of debt bondage. This meant that henceforth Athenian free persons could not be enslaved if they failed to repay their loans. The existing loans of the peasants were written off. However Solon did not carry out redistribution of land. Secondly, Solon introduced constitutional changes which gave all Athenian citizens the right to participate in the political process. The details of the nature of this participation will be discussed later. Thirdly, there were changes in the administration of justice. The aristocracy lost some of its special privileges in terms of the legal system, an important step in the direction of treating all citizens as equal in the eyes of law. According to another legal reform, in case an offence had been committed, even someone who was not the aggrieved party could approach the court for justice. Solon also introduced a law by which an appeal could be made against judicial sentences. Solon took various measures to improve the economy. Silver production was increased which in turn stimulated trade benefiting artisans and traders. Restrictions were placed on the export of wheat so that food prices were reduced. Solon's reforms helped to ameliorate the conditions of

the peasantry for the time being. However, since they were not comprehensive enough, these measures kept the discontent in check only temporarily. The abolition of debt bondage prevented the enslavement of the impoverished peasants, but in the absence of land reforms the aristocracy continued to possess a disproportionately large share of cultivable land. As we shall see, after 594 BC there was a shortage of labour, especially unfree labour, because Athenian citizens could not be forced into bondage if they were unable to repay their loans. The big landowners solved their problem of labour by increasingly employing slaves brought from outside.

Within a few decades of Solon's reforms there were fresh upheavals in Athens. Similar conditions prevailed in other states where incomplete reforms or no reforms had taken place. Taking advantage of the disturbed conditions some political leaders staged a series of coups and assumed dictatorial powers in their respective states. Peisistratus was the person responsible for the coup at Athens. He first attempted to seize power in 561 BC, but was unsuccessful and had to flee from the city. He managed to succeed in 545 BC. Peisistratus installed himself as supreme ruler of the city, ignoring the existing constitutional arrangements and defying the oligarchical institutions.

This was a new form of government for which the Greeks used the term 'tyranny'. Rulers like Peisistratus who had usurped power in this manner were called 'tyrants'. An interesting aspect of Greek tyranny was that its social base was the impoverished peasantry. Peisistratus had the support of the Athenian small landholders and poverty-stricken citizens. When he became tyrant he took over public wastelands which had been occupied by the oligarchs and distributed these among the small or dispossessed peasants. He also confiscated the property of some of the oligarchs who had gone into exile due to the establishment of tyranny, and handed these to needy farmers. The policies pursued by Peisistratus had a twofold outcome. First, the position of the peasantry was stabilized. Second, the monopoly of the

landed aristocracy over the political structure was destroyed. Peisistratus died in 527 BC. He was succeeded by his son Hippias. This was clearly a move to transform tyranny into a hereditary monarchy. Naturally this generated much resentment among the people. In any case, it has been pointed out that after a brief period tyranny had lost its historical relevance. In 510 BC Hippias was overthrown. This date marks the beginning of classical democracy at Athens.

Tyranny has an entirely negative connotation. The people who had earlier supported this form of government began to dislike it when it became oppressive and helped to overthrow it. The oligarchy hated tyranny because it had destroyed its power. In the Classical Period the Greeks generally recalled the age of tyranny with aversion. Yet we must remember that *tyranny speeded up the transition from oligarchy to democracy*. The tyrants helped to dismantle the institutions through which the oligarchy had exercised its power. This phenomenon was not confined to Athens alone. At Corinth the tyrant Periander came to power c. 600 BC. Some time before Periander, Cypselus had overthrown the ruling aristocratic group at Corinth. We also hear of other tyrants: Polycrates, the tyrant of Samos, c. 545 BC; and Lygdamis who was tyrant at Naxos around the same time. Everywhere tyranny undermined the power of the landed aristocracy and stabilized the position of the peasantry. George Thomson is of the opinion that tyranny also gave a share of political power to the traders. Thomson has drawn attention to the close links between the tyrants and the merchant class and has emphasized the trading interests of the tyrants themselves.

The tyrants were instrumental in doing away with the traditional hereditary basis of political power. We have referred to the fact that the Greek aristocracy was a close-knit hereditary elite. They enjoyed power not merely because they were wealthy but more significantly by virtue of their birth. The aristocratic families automatically held all executive, judicial, and military offices. They completely

monopolized the organs of the state. The tyrants struck at the roots of this monopoly thereby creating favourable conditions for more extensive democratization of the Greek *polis*. Tyranny outlived its utility the moment the government was freed from the clutches of the oligarchy. If tyranny had become permanent it would have degenerated into monarchy. The people withdrew their support to the tyrants after a short while. G. Glotz (*The Greek City and Its Institutions*) observes: 'The people regarded tyranny only as an expedient. They used it as a battering-ram [a heavy wooden beam used for breaking down walls or gates] with which to demolish the citadel of the oligarchs, and when their end had been achieved they hastily abandoned the weapon'. In other words, tyranny was only a convenient instrument for breaking the monopoly of the oligarchs and when this was accomplished the people got rid of the tyrants.

In this regard Sparta was an exception because, strictly speaking, it never passed through the stage of tyranny. But then Sparta never made the transition to democracy. It remained stuck with an oligarchical form of government. In fact it even had kings. The Spartans had a very strange kind of kingship, a 'dual' monarchy, which we will examine subsequently. We do have references to an arbitrator, Lycurgus, who is credited with reforms at Sparta. Our information about Lycurgus and his laws is quite vague. Historians are not even sure about his date, which is probably sometime during the century c. 700 to 600 BC.

At Athens, after Hippias has been ousted in 510 BC, major constitutional changes were introduced. These changes provided the framework for a qualitatively new political structure. The foundations of this framework were laid by Solon and Peisistratus. The person who built the edifice of Athenian democracy was Cleisthenes whose reforms from c. 507 onwards had far-reaching implications. Before discussing the evolution of Greek democracy during the Classical Period it would be worthwhile to mention some key political events of Greek history from c. 500 BC down to the Macedonian conquest.

Greek history at the beginning of the Classical Period has to be viewed against the backdrop of the westward expansion of the Persian empire. The internal history of the Persian empire falls outside the purview of our study. It is sufficient to note that in the mid-sixth century BC the Persians under king Cyrus created a vast empire which included Iran and Mesopotamia. The empire was ruled from Susa (Shush) in Iran. Cyrus and his successor Darius I extended the boundaries of the Persian empire to the eastern Mediterranean. The Persians conquered most of West Asia and Anatolia. In 546 BC Cyrus defeated Croesus, the ruler of Lydia. Lydia was one of the prominent kingdoms of western Anatolia and the annexation of this state made Persia the most formidable power in the eastern Aegean Sea. Many of the Eastern Greek settlements were soon placed under direct or indirect Persian rule.

It was obvious that the states of mainland Greece would be the next target of Persian expansion. Just at the time when democratic reforms were being initiated by Cleisthenes, Athens had to mobilize its military resources to defend itself against the Persians. From 500 to 480 BC the Greek states were locked in a fierce combat with Persia. Sparta was the foremost military power on land. Athens was the main military power at sea. The Athenians had built a strong navy which played a leading role in the conflict with Persia. The Greeks pooled together their resources under the leadership of Athens and Sparta in order to resist Persian domination.

The Persians under Darius (521-486 BC) had launched a massive offensive to bring the whole of Greece under their control. Having made the Eastern Greeks and Thrace a part of the Persian empire, Darius proceeded to subjugate the entire Aegean Sea and the Greek peninsula. The Athenians successfully repulsed the Persian army at Marathon in 490 BC. After this setback the Persians renewed their campaign for the conquest of Greece under Xerxes, who had succeeded Darius in 486 BC. When Xerxes attempted a two-pronged attack from both land and sea to capture the mainland, the

Athenian navy under Themistocles routed the Persian fleet at Salamis (480 BC). It might be mentioned here that Themistocles was the architect of Athenian naval strength. The battle of Salamis in 480 BC was the turning point of the Persian wars. It dashed Persian hopes of controlling the Aegean Sea. This engagement at sea was followed by a decisive victory of the combined Greek armies on land, at Plataea in 479 BC. At Plataea the Greek allies were led by Sparta.

Salamis and Plataea halted the Persian advance. However the threat of more Persian invasions remained. The Greek states realized that they would have to pool their resources on a regular basis to thwart further attacks. It was beyond the capacities of any single state to fight the Persians entirely on its own. On the Peloponnese there was already a strong military alliance under the leadership of the well organized Spartan army. With this arrangement the Peloponnesians were better placed to defend themselves. The problem was much more serious for the Aegean islands and the coastal states since they had no such mechanism. It was as a solution to this problem that Athens, after the battle of Salamis, took the initiative to form a confederation of states under its own leadership. This confederacy has come to be known as the Delian League. The Delian League derived its name from the island of Delos where the main treasury of the confederacy was originally located. It was formed in 478 BC. The Delian League was primarily intended to maintain a strong navy in the Aegean Sea. The members of the League were required to contribute towards the building and upkeep of the navy.

Due to reasons which it is not necessary to go into over here, there were no further Persian campaigns in the Aegean. Once the Persian threat had receded, the Athenians transformed the character of the League. They began to use the resources of the Delian League to exclusively promote their own interests. Antony Aridrewes remarks that 'as time went on, most of the allies found it burdensome to contribute their own ships and men to League expeditions.

and the nominally allied force turned increasingly into an Athenian navy, financed with allied money'.

From a voluntary confederation the Delian League gradually became an empire ruled by the Athenians. The members of the League were forced to accept the supremacy of Athens and lost their political independence. Whenever a member of the League wished to withdraw it was forcibly prevented from doing so. The most well known example is that of Naxos which was compelled to stay in the Delian League (468 BC). The process of converting the Delian League into an Athenian empire culminated in the shifting of the treasury of the League from Delos to Athens in 454 BC. Henceforth the resources of the League were reserved for the benefit of the Athenians. The voluntary contributions to the League now became enforced tribute payable to Athens. All access to the Aegean Sea was strictly regulated by Athens. The trade of the entire area passed into Athenian hands. At times fertile land in various states would be taken over and given to Athenian citizens. The prosperity which the empire and monopoly over the Aegean brought to Athens was crucial for sustaining its democratic traditions in the Classical Period.

Having established its hegemony over the Aegean, Athens tried to expand its empire by including the Peloponnese in it. This naturally brought it into conflict with Sparta which was the dominant Peloponnesian power. A prolonged contest between the two states ensued. The rivalry between Athens and Sparta for domination over Greece resulted in a major war—the Peloponnesian War. There were two phases of the war: the First Peloponnesian War (431-421 BC) and the Second Peloponnesian War (421-404 BC). By 404 BC Athens had been defeated and its navy was destroyed. At the end of the Peloponnesian War Sparta emerged as the main political and military force in Greece. But the supremacy of Sparta did not remain unchallenged. It had to face a challenge from Thebes which was the leading state in Boeotia. Down to 362 BC Sparta and Thebes fought for establishing their supremacy over Greece, although

neither of them managed to gain an upper hand in the struggle.

By this time a new development of great historical significance was taking place in northern Greece. This was the rise of Macedonia. Using improved military techniques and the rich resources of the Macedonian plains, king Philip II (382-336 BC) founded an empire which included most of the Greek states. In 338 BC, just two years before his death, Philip defeated the Greek city-states at Chaeronea. With the subjugation of the Greek states, the Classical Period of Greece and the era of the *polis* came to an end. Philip II was succeeded by his son Alexander the Great who created a vast empire. The Greek states lost their independence and were placed under Macedonian rule. Later, they were to become part of the Roman empire-

II (a)

During the course of the Archaic Period a number of Greek states evolved into democracies. Some of the earliest democracies we have reference to are Chios (600 BC) and Megara (590 BC). Even though the degree of democratization varied from state to state, it does appear that in early classical Greece the people participated in the political process to a much greater extent than what we come across in other contemporary societies. This was a fundamentally new system of governance, especially for societies with class differentiation. Some general features of Greek democracy may be noted. *Polis* was the term most frequently used to denote those political entities in ancient Greece which had some aspects of democratic functioning. The forms of government of the various *polis* ranged from purely oligarchical on the one hand, to the mature democracy of Athens on the other. In between stood the states, probably the majority, with elements of oligarchy and democracy combined in varying proportions. The states about which we have information do not exhibit any homogeneity in the structure of the *polis*. The historical data is also quite uneven.

Contemporary sources have a lot to tell us about Athens and Sparta, but we know almost nothing about democracy in important states like Corinth and Syracuse.

The *polls* was territorially a small area. Moreover, as has already been mentioned, the size of population was also relatively small. One should bear in mind that democracy was an entirely new concept in this period. The mechanism for making this system function efficiently was still in the process of being crystallized. Given the constraints of ancient society, democracy would not have been functional had the *polls* been large either territorially or in terms of its inhabitants. This brings us to an important feature of Greek democracy. In modern democracy the people choose their representatives who then deliberate, legislate and govern on their behalf. In ancient Greece, democracy implied participation by all the people in meetings of the assembly.

The assembly of the people was the basic institution of democracy. 'People' did not mean all the inhabitants of a *polls*—not even all the free inhabitants. It meant only those whom we may call citizens. First of all, women were excluded. Second, only adults, i.e. male adults, enjoyed the privilege of being citizens. Third, those who were not original residents of the *polls*, or were considered outsiders for some reason or the other, did not form part of the assembly. In Sparta the free non-citizens were called *perioikoi*; at Athens they were known as metics (*metoikoi*). Many of the traders settled at Athens were *metics*. Of course slaves had no rights whatsoever.

The definition of the community which enjoyed citizenship rights differed from one *polls* to another depending upon historical circumstances. At one extreme were the Spartans who fiercely guarded the rights of citizenship of the Dorian tribal community to which they belonged, making the citizens a small closed group. In the later 'dark ages' Sparta annexed two large territories in the southern Peloponnese, Laconia and Messenia, and totally divested the Laconians and Messenians of all their rights. The entire population of these territories was enslaved.

Apart from the enslaved Laconians and Messenians, Sparta had a large number of free non-citizens (*perioikoi*) as well. But the numerical strength of the citizens remained exceedingly small.

At the other extreme is the example of Thebes. In Boeotia, where Thebes was the dominant *polis*, the states had come together to form a Boeotian confederacy. The members of the confederacy retained their own governments. The citizens of these states had dual citizenship rights, both as citizens of their respective *polis*, as well as of the political institutions of the Boeotian confederacy. As for Athens, when it initially expanded its territory in Attica it deposed the local governments of Marathon, Eleusis, etc. which were then in existence in that region, but incorporated these communities within its own *polis* and extended full citizenship rights to them.

The citizens of the Greek *polis* could exercise their right to participate and vote in the assembly, which was the basic right of citizenship, by personally attending the meetings of the assembly. One had to actually go the *agora*, a designated open place in the city where the meetings of the assembly were held, in order to exercise this right. This would have caused some inconvenience to people living at a distance from the city. Such a conception of democracy would have been unworkable if the respective Greek states possessed a very big area. No wonder then that contemporary political thinkers always had in mind a community of manageable size when they talked of the *polis*. Plato worked out the figure of 5040 citizens for an ideal *polis* while Aristotle suggested that a *polis* should comprise not less than ten and not more than ten thousand citizens. In both cases the emphasis is on keeping the numbers within sensible limits.

Another feature of the *polis* was the presence of a council, a much smaller body than the assembly, which held concrete charge of the government. The council of elders and heads of prominent clans had been an advisory body under monarchy during the 'dark ages'. In *Iliad* and *Odyssey* the kings consult the council on crucial issues. With the decline

of monarchy, real power passed into the hands of oligarchical councils.

It was not possible for the assembly to meet frequently. Even when it met it could only debate and vote on few issues. This gave the council wide ranging authority for intervening in the functioning of the assembly. Usually the council convened the assembly, prepared its agenda, and guided its sessions. The particulars of various matters were worked out in the council or smaller committees (*probouloi* was the term commonly used for committees). The system of *probouleusis*, or prior consultation in the council before a matter was submitted to the assembly for approval, was adopted by many states. According to Andrewes the 'probouleutic system of government', as this has come to be called, was intended to be a check on the assembly. The council was a very powerful body in most states and was often dominated by the landed aristocracy. But it could also be genuinely representative as at Athens.

Athens has a special significance in a discussion on Greek democracy due to the scope of its accomplishment. Moreover our knowledge about the political structure of Athens is more extensive than that of other states. In a sense Athens is more an exception than the rule. We saw that the reforms of Solon (594 BC) were an important stage in the evolution of Athenian democracy. The Athenian assembly had not met for a long time and had ceased to function. Solon convened the assembly of the citizens, thereby reviving this body. He constituted a new council of four hundred members. The new Athenian council was called *boule*. The old Athenian council, called Areopagus, was an organ of the oligarchy. The Areopagus was not abolished, but its functions were curtailed till eventually it ceased to play an important role. The *boule* was now the main centre of political power. Membership of the *boule* was based on property qualifications and not on hereditary right, which in itself was something new. To be a member of the old council, the Areopagus, one had to belong to aristocratic clans.

Solon divided the Athenian citizens into four classes. The property or wealth possessed by a citizen determined his class. Right at the top were the *pentacosiomedimni*, who possessed property which yielded at least 500 *medimnoi* (a unit for measuring the quantity of grain) of wheat, or its equivalent value in wine or oil. Next were the citizens whose property yielded at least 300 *medimnoi*. The third category was that of owners of property yielding at least 200 *medimnoi*. Those belonging to this class were called the *zeugitai*. The *zeugitai* were the small and middle peasants, who, as we shall see, also constituted the main strength of the Athenian army and could not therefore be easily ignored. Right at the bottom were the *thetes* who had property yielding less than 200 *medimnoi*. The *thetes* were the poorest class among the citizens. This class included poor peasants, artisans and the landless.

Membership of the *boule* was open only to the first three classes. The impoverished sections, i.e. the *thetes*, were excluded from the council. Qualifications for public offices corresponded to this four-fold division. The first two classes held the principal posts, including the archonships. The *zeugitai* held minor offices. The *thetes* only had the right to participate in meetings of the assembly. Despite these reforms some of the major priestly positions continued to be the monopoly of the aristocracy.

After the overthrow of Hippias in 510 BC, Cleisthenes carried forward democratic reforms at Athens. His main aim was the reorganize the citizens in such a manner that the aristocracy would find it difficult to use clan and kinship organization to maintain its hold over the political system. It should be understood that even after the reforms of Solon, kinship groups continued to play a decisive role in ensuring that the aristocracy monopolized the leading official positions. The property qualifications laid down by Solon decided the kind of political rights that a citizen had. Nevertheless, the selection of candidates was done within the kinship group to which a citizen belonged. The citizens were traditionally divided into four Ionian

tribes. These traced their descent from the tribes or clans ('phratries') which had originally settled down in Attica. The Ionian tribes of Athens were kinship groups. The four Ionian tribes (*phylai*) into which the citizens were divided should not be confused with the four-fold classification of Athenian citizens by Solon which was based solely on property qualifications. Following the reforms of Solon, the political role of these tribes had been reduced but not abolished. Each tribe sent one hundred members to the *houle*. The aristocracy was still able to exploit kinship ties, clan loyalties and its own traditional influence in these tribes to manipulate selection of candidates in their favour (members of the council and for various posts were usually chosen by draw of lots). Peisistratus, by concentrating all power in his hands, made oligarchical control over the *phylai* irrelevant.

Cleisthenes discarded the kinship principle for grouping the citizens. The four kinship based *phylai* were abolished. They were replaced by ten residential *phylai* (507 BC). These new *phylai* were based on a radically new concept. Whereas the older terminology was retained, the *phylai* of Cleisthenes had nothing to do with the former method of organizing the citizens. From now on the *phyle* to which a person belonged was determined by the place where he resided and not upon his kinship ties. The original tribal groupings had already been weakened during the sixth century BC because when citizenship rights were extended to some sections which had been hitherto excluded, they were accommodated in the existing tribes. Thus there were already quite a few members within the pre-Cleisthenes *phylai* who had no kinship ties with other members. Thomson has suggested that this problem became particularly acute when Peisistratus made many artisans and traders (including *metics*) citizens of Athens. Therefore the reform of the *phylai* assumed great urgency. It is in this context that we should view the top priority which Cleisthenes accorded to this question.

The primary unit of the democratic structure established by Cleisthenes was the 'deme'. Every citizen was first and

foremost a member of a particular deme. The deme was the smallest geographical unit into which the *polis* of Athens was divided for political purposes. There were nearly two hundred demes (*demoi*) in all. The demes were responsible for maintaining registers of citizens. They had their own elected governments, including an assembly, and officials. The local governments were headed by the *demarchos* or chief of the deme. In the words of Thomson, 'Cleisthenes could not have devised a better way of filling the void left in the minds of the people by the dissolution of the clan'. Depending on the location of the demes, they were grouped together to form ten residential *phylai*. A slightly complicated arrangement was made by Cleisthenes for grouping the demes into *phylai*. There were three types of demes: coastal demes, city demes and rural demes in the interior. All the *phylai* got some share of the three types of demes. Thus one-third demes (*trittyes*) of the *phylai* would be coastal demes; one-third demes would be urban; and one-third demes would be those located in the interior. This was the system of dividing *phylai* into *trittyes* or thirds. The three *trittyes* were coast, town and interior. This division of *phylai* into *trittyes*, i.e. demes of three types, balanced the resources of the *phylai*.

Corresponding to the reform of the *phylai*, Cleisthenes made changes in the composition of the *boule*. The strength of the *boule* was raised from four hundred to five hundred members. Fifty members were selected from each of the ten *phylai*. Within the respective *phylai* the fifty members of the council were chosen by draw of lots from among the demes in proportion to the population of each deme. Membership of the *boule* was thrown open to all citizens, including *thetes*. Any citizen over the age of thirty could be a member of the *boule*. Members served for one year and could be selected for a second term only after a gap.

The *boule* had enormous executive, judicial and administrative responsibilities. It had to meet everyday for transacting business. The collection of taxes was supervised by the *boule*. It looked after foreign relations, maintained

ships and ports, and regulated trade. The meetings of the assembly were guided by the *boule*. Membership of the *boule* was a full-time job and it has been correctly observed that only the wealthier citizens would have had the time and leisure to serve on the council. Over a period of time the Athenian *boule* came to be dominated by the more affluent sections of the citizens. By c. 450 BC, when Pericles became the dominant figure in Athenian politics (Pericles was the leading politician of Athens from c. 450 BC till his death in 429 BC), there was definitely an attempt to restrict the access of the lower classes to political power.

The Athenian assembly was called *ecclesia*. All the citizens (i.e. those whose names were recorded in the registers of citizenship kept in the demes) had the right to participate and vote in the assembly. The minimum age for membership of the *ecclesia* was eighteen years. It has been estimated that during the fifth century BC there were about 45,000 citizens in Athens. However, Andrewes notes that normally about 5000 to 6000 citizens actually attended the meetings of the *ecclesia*. The sessions of the *ecclesia* were called by the *boule*, which also fixed the agenda for these meetings. The proceedings of the *ecclesia* were conducted by the current presiding officer of the *boule* (the chairman of the *boule* was chosen on a daily basis since the council was expected to meet everyday). For the sessions of the assembly, members of the Athenian *ecclesia* assembled at a place called Pnyx or else at another location which was known as the 'theatre of Dionysus'. Incidentally, these sessions were one-day affairs. Whenever the assembly was expected to vote on something, it met in the *agora*.

The *agora* had been traditionally associated with the meetings of the assembly. This was a large open space in the city centre which otherwise served as a marketplace. When Cleisthenes began his reforms in 507 BC, all the free adult males who were original inhabitants of the demes were registered as citizens. Subsequently, as and when the male descendants of these citizens attained the age of eighteen they too were enrolled as citizens. Till 450 BC it was sufficient

for a person to have an Athenian father to become a citizen. In 450 BC Pericles restricted citizenship rights to free adult males *both* of whose parents (mother and father) were of Athenian origin.

We saw that in 752 BC the Athenian kings (*basileus*) had been removed from power. The *basileus* was substituted by officers who were chosen from among the oligarchy. These officers were called archons. Initially the archonship was for a period of ten years, but it was subsequently made annual. The archons were invariably from the aristocracy. In 487 BC the archonship was made an elective post. After another reform in 456 BC even ordinary people could aspire to these positions.

Sparta had a somewhat unusual government which combined elements of monarchy, oligarchy and democracy. The overall character of Spartan government was oligarchical. The Spartan citizens were a very small group among the inhabitants of the *polis*. At the beginning of the Classical Period Sparta is reported to have had about 8000 citizens and their numbers declined considerably within a century. Unlike Athens, Sparta never accommodated new groups within its political structure. At the same time it is significant that from a very early date the entire body of citizens had a role to play in the government. Theoretically they were all equal. The Spartan assembly was an active organ of the state even at the beginning of the Archaic Period. There are references to meetings of the Spartan assembly held on the occasion of a festival which was dedicated to the Greek god Apollo. Hence the Spartan assembly is sometimes referred to as *apella*.

The council in Sparta was a powerful oligarchical body called the *gerousia*. The *gerousia* had thirty members. Two of the members of the *gerousia* were the Spartan kings. Sparta had a peculiar monarchical system. Two kings, belonging to two different clans (the Agiads and the Euryponrids), ruled simultaneously. This in itself is an indication of the limited authority of the kings. The kings were *ex officio* members of the council. In the council they had no special privileges. The

remaining twenty-eight members were drawn from aristocratic families. These twenty-eight members were called *gerontes* (*geron*, old man) and were required to be above sixty years of age. Membership of the *gerousia* was for life, although at a later date it was made annual. The main officers of the state (corresponding to the archons of Athens) were called ephors. There were five ephors. The Spartan ephors were magistrates with wide ranging executive, judicial and police powers. They were elected for a period of one year from among all the citizens. We can assume that the aristocracy would have had a better chance of becoming ephors. It is likely that the ephors also had the right to attend sessions of the *gerousia*.

1Kb)

A distinctive characteristic of Greek democracy was the close link between citizenship rights and the military system. The Greek states did not maintain standing armies of professional soldiers. To a large extent this was because they lacked the resources for financing such an army. All free adult males were expected to render military service. This in effect meant that the citizens were simultaneously soldiers. The entire adult male population of the community constituted the army. At the beginning of the Archaic Period the assemblies were often summoned to discuss issues relating to war and defence. If a raid was being planned the assembly would meet to discuss strategy. In the Homeric epics the warrior chiefs submit proposals for making peace or for launching campaigns to their respective assemblies for approval. We can see that these are assemblies of citizens which on such occasions may be regarded as assemblies of soldiers.

To be a member of the assembly carried with it military duties. At Athens free adult males were eligible for membership of the assembly only when they had put in two years of military service after they came of age. At Sparta the provisions for young offspring of citizens undergoing

military training were even more stringent. A person had to go through a tough military course before he could be accepted as a citizen. Sparta placed great emphasis on imparting martial skills of an exceptionally high standard to its citizen body, making the Spartans a formidable fighting force on land.

The nucleus of the Greek armies was the hoplite infantry. Hoplites were soldiers who paid for their own military equipment. This kind of soldier became common in most of the Greek states. Since a citizen had to mobilize his own resources to furnish himself with his fighting gear, it was necessary that he should have the requisite means at his disposal. The overwhelming majority of the hoplites were small and middle farmers. In the context of Athens it was the *zeugitai* who formed the hoplite infantry. In other words the Greek armies were essentially armies of peasant soldiers. As these peasant soldiers were vital for the survival of the Greek *polis* they could not be easily ignored by the ruling class. This was one of the factors which assured them a certain degree of participation in the political system. The impoverishment of the peasantry did create a shortage of hoplites because the poor and the landless (the *thetes*) did not have the means to procure armour or weapons. The Athenians kept the metics as a reserve army while Sparta began to enlist the *perioikoi*.

The hoplites were foot soldiers who wore a heavy armour. This heavy armour included a mask-like helmet. The spear was the main weapon of the hoplites. They also carried a short sword and a shield. The key to the effectiveness of the hoplites lay in the manner in which they were arranged on the battlefield. This formation was the phalanx in which eight columns of soldiers were ranged very closely side by side. The idea was that the hoplites should be so tightly packed in the phalanx that their combined unified thrust would have great force. The engagement was supposed to be short and decisive.

The hoplite phalanx was best suited to open plains. Heavy armour would have been cumbersome in hilly areas.

This posed a problem for the Greeks because much of their terrain is mountainous. Usually a brief battle in some open field (the venue was at times agreed upon by both sides before the fighting took place) decided the issue. A more serious disadvantage of having an army of peasant soldiers was that frequent military mobilization would interfere with the agricultural tasks of the farmers. Most of the campaigns therefore took place at those times when the peasants were not busy in the fields. Ordinarily these campaigns were raids into neighbouring territories for booty, or encounters to settle border disputes. M.I. Finley has argued that the notion of a ten-year long Trojan war in *Iliad* is too far-fetched. The normal practice was to go in for short expeditions to obtain booty. The Peloponnesian War was an exceptional case. This long war devastated the countryside of Attica, Megara and Corinth.

A partial solution to the problem of relying exclusively on peasant soldiers was worked out by Athens at the beginning of the Classical Period. It made the navy an additional wing of its armed force. The naval force was centrally financed. Circa 500 BC Athens invested some of its silver, which was extracted from the rich mines of Laurium, in building a large naval fleet. It may be recalled that Themistocles was the person who initiated this project. The main strength of the Athenian naval fleet was a new type of ship called 'trireme'. The trireme had 170 oars and could move with great speed. The Athenian navy made a noteworthy contribution to Greek victory in the Persian wars and was the basis of its control of the Aegean after 480 BC.

The rowers for the triremes were recruited largely from amongst the *thetes*. They were paid by the state. The *thetes* who sought employment on the triremes were landless citizens who were easily available for such work, or were poor peasants who could not afford to be hoplites. The tribute realized from the members of the Delian League sustained the Athenian navy. It has been suggested that one of the reasons why the Peloponnesian Wars got prolonged was because of the military stalemate till the closing phase

of the war. This stalemate was caused by the fact that for a long time the Spartans were not militarily in a position to take on the Athenians at sea, while the Athenians did not have the capacity to destroy Spartan supremacy on land. It is worth noting that even after Sparta had vanquished Athens, Spartan armed strength was insufficient for it to become the master of the whole of Greece. It faced opposition from various states, particularly Thebes. Eventually the Macedonians, who relied on a professional army financed by the state and had a superior military organization which included a strong cavalry, managed to overwhelm the Greek states and established their ascendancy over the region.

III

The ancient Greeks were the first to use slaves on a large scale in all sectors of production. All the civilizations which we have discussed so far (Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Hittite, Minoan, Phoenician, Mycenaean, Persian) employed slave labour. In these civilizations, unlike Greece, slave labour played a limited role in production. Class differentiation, surpluses, state formation and warfare had created the conditions for slavery. Gerda Lerner in her study *The Creation of Patriarchy* has argued that patriarchal society (a society in which women are subjugated to men) was an important precondition for slavery. She has shown the interconnection between the rise of patriarchal society, and the origins of slavery. According to her, historically patriarchal society *came before* slavery. Humans first introduced permanent inequalities in their societies by establishing unequal gender relations. The subjugation of women provided the model for subjugating fellow human beings. When this model was extended to other communities to reduce people to bondage the institution of slavery was born. The initial pool of slaves was formed of prisoners of war. This source might be supplemented from within the community by those who were enslaved due to their

inability to repay loans (debt bondage). Wars however brought captives in large numbers. Moreover it was easier to enslave outsiders since they did not have any bond or status within the community and could be exploited ruthlessly (see chapter four, above).

In chapter four we noted that the first slaves were women. After a group was defeated in war, the tendency was to slaughter the adult males and make the women and children captives. Only when a society had access to armed force on a sufficiently large scale did it begin to enslave men. Scholars have pointed out that the enslavement of a substantial group of men from a different community was relatively difficult for two reasons. Firstly, many of these men had some kind of fighting skills so that any attempt to keep them captive on a permanent basis would have to be backed by adequate force. Remember that patriarchal society had already come into existence and in the unequal division of labour that took place, all the fighting was done by males. Secondly, women slaves could be compelled to develop new ties within the community that had captured them. For instance, they were forced to bear children (rape was the most widely used instrument of coercion). While the women, especially if they had children, might be made to have some artificial bond with the enslaving group, this was unlikely in the case of men.

This pattern of development of slavery can be seen in Greece. In Mycenaean society female slave labour constituted a part of the workforce in the palaces. For example, the palace at Pylos had at least 550 women slaves engaged in textile production. In the Linear B tablets the term used for slaves is *doeri*. In the 'dark ages' the phenomenon of slavery was quite widespread. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* contain numerous references to women being made captive during wars. Women slaves figure prominently in the Homeric epics. Women were used for domestic work and for manufacturing textiles.

The scale on which slave labour was exploited in Archaic and Classical Greece was fundamentally different from that

of earlier civilizations. Slaves were to be found in every area of production. They were occupied predominantly in agriculture. Mining and handicraft production were two other sectors in which slave labour was important. Some historians believe that the role of slavery in Greek agriculture has been exaggerated and that free peasants sustained the agrarian economy. We will examine this debate after we have discussed Roman slavery, but it should be noted that the Greeks employed slaves in agriculture much more extensively than earlier societies.

In the later 'dark ages' Sparta was already using slave labour in a manner that was unprecedented. After the conquest of Laconia and Messenia towards the end of the 'dark ages', Sparta converted the entire population of these two regions into slaves. The Spartans introduced a peculiar form of slavery called 'helotry'. Helots were slaves who were owned by the state. The Laconians and Messenians became helots, i.e., they were the collective property of the Spartan citizens. They were forced to work for the Spartans. The Laconian and Messenian helots worked in the fields, tended flocks of sheep or goats and did domestic work. Their land was taken over by Sparta and divided into holdings called *kleroi*. The *kleroi* were allotted to families of Spartan citizens. These were cultivated with the labour of the helots.

Given the aristocratic nature of Spartan society it is unlikely that there was an equitable distribution of the *kleroi*. The aristocracy had much larger holdings. The distribution of helots was regulated by the state. The state assigned a certain number of slaves to each family depending upon its requirements for labour. Naturally the aristocracy got the largest share. The difference between helotry and other types of slavery was that these slaves were not owned individually. Moreover they were allowed to maintain family ties. The children born to the helots had the same status as their parents. This meant that Sparta was able to meet its requirements of slave labour from among the Laconians and Messenians over a long period of time. On the other hand such a large population of helots—who still

had bonds of community—could be kept in servitude only by mobilizing force on a massive scale. The Spartan slaves far outnumbered the Spartan citizens. The rigorous military training imparted to the citizens of Sparta kept them in a permanent state of military preparedness. With this kind of force at their disposal the Spartans could keep the Laconians and Messenians enslaved for several generations.

Helotry may be regarded as a more primitive form of slavery which in turn was a reflection of the relative backwardness of Spartan economy. Trade and handicraft production remained underdeveloped in this area so that helotry, which was best suited to a simple agrarian economy, could survive as the dominant type of slavery in Sparta. It must be remembered that privately owned slaves brought from outside presuppose, among other things, an active trading network, sufficient development of individual property, and some amount of petty-commodity production. Helotry was prevalent in other Greek states as well, as for instance in Thessaly, Crete and Argolis. In Thessaly the helots were called *penestai*.

Elsewhere, privately owned slaves increasingly became a typical feature of Greek society and economy. Several terms were in use to describe such slaves, the most common being *doulos*. Privately owned slaves were present since Minoan and Mycenaean times. There is evidence of slaves being used extensively for agricultural production on the island of Chios in c. 600 BC. We know that there was an flourishing slave trade in the eastern Mediterranean. The Phoenicians were actively involved in this trade. The Archaic Period saw an expansion in the number of slaves (*doulos*), especially at Athens. We have already noted that by c. 600 BC debt bondage due to impoverishment of the peasantry had produced a serious crisis at Athens. The crisis was temporarily resolved when Solon abolished debt bondage in 594 BC. The problem must have become very acute around this time because abolition of debt bondage was a major demand of the Athenian peasantry in their struggle against the aristocracy. The worst affected were a

section of the peasantry called the *hektemoroi*. The *hektemoroi* were poor peasants who were allowed to cultivate their holdings on the condition that they would hand over one-sixth of the produce to a class with superior rights in the land they tilled (Thomson has interpreted the term as meaning that these cultivators could retain only one-sixth of the produce and had to hand over five-sixths). If they were unable to pay their share they, along with their families, were enslaved. This was one of the ways in which the landed aristocracy solved its problem of labour.

The abolition of debt bondage under Solon had momentous implications for the subsequent evolution of the Athenian social structure. After 594 BC it was no longer possible to coerce someone from within the Athenian community to become a slave. This created a shortage of labour for the big landowners. They now began importing slaves in large numbers for working on their estates. It should be understood that a shortage of labour does not necessarily or automatically lead to slavery. The point is that this was the remedy which the ancient Greeks adopted in their specific historical circumstances.

M. I. Finley has put forth the view that slavery becomes widespread in an economy (particularly an agrarian economy) when two preconditions are present. Firstly, the internal supply of labour in a given society should be severely deficient in relation to its demand for labour. Secondly, on the one hand there should be considerable concentration of landed property in the hands of a small group, and on the other hand there should be a number of small proprietors. This means that, to start with, there has to be a class of big landowners who require labour to cultivate their fields. However, if there is a substantial class of small peasant proprietors it will be hard to find additional labour as these peasants would not be inclined to work on the holdings of the rich landlords. Of course there might be some landless labourers who could be employed on the big estates. Finley notes that in ancient Greece hired free labour was involved in all types of production. Further, there were

many poor peasants (e.g. *thetes*) whose holdings were so meagre that they had to seek seasonal employment on the estates to supplement their income. But the workforce provided by this labour was insufficient. In Athens, after the reforms of Solon and the stabilization of the peasantry under Peisistratus it became even more difficult to procure labour internally. Hence the growing tendency to get slave labour from outside.

The fact that various types of slavery were well established in Greece since the Minoan-Mycenaean age made it easier to go in for this form of unfree labour. Slavery had been institutionalized (the machinery of the state was used to enforce this status) and by the Archaic Period there was a set of legal provisions pertaining to slaves. Slaves were clearly recognized as property. The growth of democracy made the contrast between free and unfree status much sharper. Here it is necessary to add that the prior existence of an organized slave trade enabled the big landowners to get regular supplies of slaves throughout the Archaic and Classical era. The demand for slave labour multiplied manifold after the Persian wars when the aristocracy acquired land in different parts of the Athenian empire.

Warfare, piracy, and raids conducted in areas where primitive tribal communities lived, nurtured the lucrative trade in slaves. At the beginning of the Archaic Period most of the slaves had been Greeks; in the Classical Period the majority were non-Greeks. Our information about the places of origin of these slaves is scanty, but it seems that southern Russia, the area around the Black Sea, Thrace, central Europe, Syria and Italy were the main areas from where slaves were captured. Being non-Greeks, the slaves were complete outsiders and this made it difficult for them to forge ties among themselves thereby precluding the possibility of revolts.

The prosperity of Athens during the Classical Period rested on the expansion of slave labour. Slavery provided the Athenian ruling class sufficient resources and leisure for

the pursuit of culture. Historians have offered figures for Athenian slaves during the fifth century BC ranging from 60,000 to 110,000. It has been estimated that of these nearly 20,000 to 30,000 worked in the silver mines of Laurium. Laurium, located at the southern tip of Attica, was the richest source of silver in classical Greece. These mines were owned by the state. The slaves were hired out to the state on contract by big slave owners. The silver produced by these mines with the labour of a huge slave workforce was a major factor in establishing the economic supremacy of Athens in the Aegean. Besides agriculture and mining, slaves dominated handicraft production. Slaves were also made to do routine administrative tasks. The Athenian state owned some slaves for this purpose. Slaves were employed as policemen and prisons wardens. Lastly, they did various kinds of domestic and menial work.

Agriculture was the mainstay of the Greek economy. Due to the nature of the terrain plots were generally small. The average holdings were between 5 to 15 acres. Much of the soil is of a poor quality and a lot of physical labour is required to cultivate it. In many places small canals had to be dug to irrigate the fields. In the mountainous parts of the country terraces had to be cut into the hillsides to form agricultural fields. Since the soil is light and dry and the fields were not too large, the hoe was preferred to the plough for loosening the soil. This was particularly true of the poorer farmers. Wheat, olive, vine and flax were the principal crops. Goats, sheep and pigs were also reared.

With the end of the 'dark ages' the seaborne trade of the Aegean and the eastern Mediterranean had revived. From c. 600 BC there was a vibrant commerce in this region, a large proportion of which was in Greek hands. The Eastern Greek states, Athens and Corinth were some of the leading participants in this trade. The Greeks traded in olive oil, wine, wheat, vases, textiles, gold, silver, slaves, and various kinds of luxury items. After the Persian wars Athens dominated the commerce of the Aegean. Peiraeus was the chief port of Athens. Peiraeus remained one of the busiest

ports of the eastern Mediterranean throughout the Classical Period. The trade of this region received a boost as a result of a significant breakthrough. This was the introduction of coinage. For the first time in history money became the medium of exchange. The state of Lydia in western Anatolia is credited with having made this innovation. The Lydians began striking coins around 600 BC. Soon other Greek states, including Athens, adopted this new medium of exchange. The coins were made of silver and electrum (an alloy of gold and silver). With the vast silver output of the Laurium mines at its disposal, Athens could mint coins of a uniformly high quality. These had wide acceptability, which reinforced its premier position in the trading network of the area.

IV (a)

The Classical Period of Greece was an age of brilliant achievements in philosophy, science and art. The democratic traditions of the Greek *polis* provided the right setting for the development of thought. The freedom which democracy gave to the citizens of the *polis* allowed new ideas to blossom. Slavery gave a section of the citizens the means to enjoy leisure and thereby promote culture. Ancient Greek thought represented a great leap forward in the endeavour of the human mind to understand nature and the meaning of existence.

The first clearly identifiable attempt in this direction was the Ionian school of thought which flourished around 600 BC in the Eastern Greek settlement of Miletus. The three names associated with this school are Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes. These three are considered to be founders of Western philosophy. Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes were concerned with the problem of what constitutes nature, i. e., the basic element or elements of which it is formed, and its driving force. Thales held that water, or rather 'the moist', was the basic element of nature and that everything had evolved out of water. Anaximander spoke of hot, cold, wet and dry together being the main

principle underlying the universe. He had a theory of opposites (hot and cold; wet and dry). Their interaction led to a cyclical process of transformation of wet to dry through the intervention of heat and so on. For Anaximenes air was the primary substance of the universe.

The second important trend in early Greek thought was that of Pythagoras and his followers (Pythagoreans). Pythagoras was an Eastern Greek from the island of Samos. He emigrated from Samos and settled down in Croton, which was a Western Greek colony in southern Italy (c. 530 BC). In Croton Pythagoras became the founder of a new religious sect. During the Archaic Period there were a number of religious sects or orders in different parts of Greece. These sects resembled secret societies. Their membership was open only to a select few who had understood and accepted the principles of the sect. New members had to undergo an elaborate admission procedure. The sects had specific rituals and practices in which only members of the sect could participate. The sects revolved around certain cults and the worship of particular deities. An interesting feature of these sects was the mixture of early tribal beliefs with Greek religion of the Archaic Period.

One of the well known cults of this period was that of the Orphics, which was centred around Orpheus. Orpheus was a tragic figure in Greek mythology who was closely associated with music and poetry. The Orphic cult was Thracian (or, perhaps, Egyptian) in origin but had become popular in large parts of Greece. Orphic beliefs were characterized by mysticism, a sense of sin and the notion of atonement. Pythagoras was strongly influenced by Orphic mysticism. His religious sect was organized along the same lines as the Orphic fraternity, i.e., it functioned like a secret society. The two sects shared some common practices like restrictions on eating meat.

Pythagoras borrowed the concept of the immortality of the soul from the Orphics. He modified this idea by suggesting that after the death of human beings their souls enter the bodies of animals. The Pythagoreans (and to some

extent even the Orphics) believed in the transmigration of souls. In other words, the soul was supposed to be independent of the body. Pythagoras laid emphasis on achieving harmony for the soul. For this he preached the principle of 'the mean', or creatively evolving a middle path between two extremes. 'The mean' was the key to harmony. The search for harmony and 'the mean' led Pythagoras to a study of nature, the musical scale and mathematics. Pythagoras attached special importance to particular numbers and symmetry. It is as a mathematician that Pythagoras is most familiar, mainly because of his famous geometrical theorem which states that, in a right-angled triangle, the square of the length of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides. Pythagoras's interest in geometry was a by-product of his religious ideas.

Among the other early Greek thinkers mention should be made of Democritus (c. 470-400 BC). Democritus tried to understand nature in more rational terms. He concluded that everything in nature was made of 'atoms'. This should not be confused with the modern scientific theory of atoms because Democritus's notion of atoms was not based on observation or experimentation. His notion of atoms was only a philosophical concept which referred to the basic element of nature. However, Democritus asserted that everything in the universe was ultimately some form of matter. He also stated that everything in nature was constantly undergoing change.

The flowering of ideas had its impact on science, medicine and the writing of history. The growth of rational trends in Greek thought helped to release these disciplines from superstition. In medicine, Hippocrates of Cos (469-399 BC) was the most outstanding figure of the Classical Period. Hippocrates removed medicine from the realm of magical cures and tried to give it a scientific foundation. As a physician he treated diseases by carefully examining the symptoms and arriving at a diagnosis based entirely on the observed symptoms. For Hippocrates diseases had natural

causes which could be subjected to scientific investigation. The line of treatment was determined by the diagnosis.

The writings of Herodotus and Thucydides gave a new, and more modern, meaning to history as a distinct branch of knowledge. So far, historical accounts had been a mixture of facts, fiction, myths, legends, stories, fables and anecdotes. With Herodotus historical method as we understand it was born, for which reason he is often called 'the father of history'. Herodotus was born in Anatolia, c. 490 BC. He wrote on Greek history from the mid-sixth century BC. He presented a detailed account of the Persian wars. Herodotus travelled widely and gathered historical information about several countries, including Egypt. He tried to verify and evaluate his evidence before recording it. Thucydides wrote during the latter half of the fifth century BC. He was an Athenian (c. 460-399 BC). Thucydides prepared a history of the Peloponnesian Wars. He himself was a participant in these wars and was therefore an eyewitness to many of the events. Significantly he wrote from the standpoint of an impartial observer. Thucydides's history is both a straightforward narrative and incisive analysis of the contemporary political situation of Greece.

In the development of science the Greeks were more concerned with theory. As a matter of fact Greek thought right from the time of Thales down to the philosophers of the Classical Period is not easily distinguishable from science because it is directed towards comprehending the principles of nature. In the long run this led to greater emphasis on pure contemplation at the cost of applied science and experimentation. On the other hand such a tendency led to the refinement of ideas.

The golden era of classical Greek philosophy began with Socrates, around 400 BC. Athens was the main centre of the intellectual activity of this era. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were the philosophers who took Greek thought to towering heights. With Socrates, who was the teacher of Plato, there was a shift from thinking about nature to thinking about the nature of human existence. In the process, Socrates clarified

several philosophical categories which in turn led to a more sophisticated level of thought and argument. Socrates marked such a major break with the past that all the Western philosophical traditions before him are simply classified as 'pre-Socratic'.

Plato (427-347 BC) had studied under Socrates. Plato set up an institution (the Academy) at Athens where he taught philosophy. Plato's philosophy is regarded as 'idealist'. He argued that things have no independent existence outside our minds. Whatever we perceive is actually a product of our thought process. He held that experience is unreal, only ideas are real. Reality can only be grasped through contemplation. The manner in which Plato posed the question of the relationship between mind and matter was his lasting contribution to philosophy. Plato exerted a powerful influence on later Western and Arab thought.

Aristotle (384-322 BC) was a disciple of Plato but he developed ideas which were different from those of his teacher. After the death of Plato he left the Academy. Several years later he founded a new institution (the Lyceum) at Athens. Aristotle never completely abandoned the ideas of Plato, but he rejected Plato's view that experience was unnecessary to understand reality. Aristotle, it should be noted, was a keen student of science. His main area of interest was biology. He made a careful study of plants and animals. Scientific observation was an integral part of his method. Aristotle's school of thought is called 'Peripatetic'.

Plato and Aristotle were products of the years which followed the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian Wars. This was a period of demoralization for the Athenians. Athens had lost its empire and opportunities for its ruling class were restricted. This background accounts for the conservative nature of the political and social ideas of the two thinkers. They were opposed to involving the masses in the decision-making process. In the ideal *polis* visualized by them the people would have a limited role to play in the government. The undemocratic elements in their political thought was a reflection of the mood of the Athenian elite

which, after 400 BC, wanted to curtail the democratic rights of the ordinary citizens.

IV (b)

We observed at the beginning of this chapter that though Greece was not a politically unified entity yet as a people the Greeks shared many cultural traditions. This was especially true of Greek religion. The Greeks had a common religious tradition. Some of their religious beliefs were a part of the universal heritage of the eastern Mediterranean. The basic framework of Greek religion of the Archaic and Classical Periods can be seen in the Homeric epics. *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are *not* religious texts, but they give almost a complete picture of Greek religious mythology as it had evolved by the end of the 'dark ages'.

The Homeric epics, together with Hesiod's *Theogony*, carried out the task of systematizing Greek religion. Greek religion as outlined in *Iliad* and *Odyssey* was a religion that was acceptable to the upper classes. Since Homer was mainly concerned with the doings of the Mycenaean warrior aristocracy he depicted the religion which was practised by the aristocracy of his own times (i. e. later 'dark ages'). Consequently he might have excluded those aspects of Greek religion which were popular at the level of the poor folk. However the influence of the epics was so great that the version of Greek religion presented by him had a wide appeal throughout the Archaic and Classical Periods.

Greek religion was pantheistic (pantheism may be defined as 'readiness to believe in all or many gods'). There were twelve main gods. The Greeks believed that these gods lived on Mount Olympus located in Thessaly. Hence they are called Olympian gods. The twelve Olympian deities mentioned in Homer are Zeus, Poseidon, Apollo, Ares, Hermes, Hephaestus, Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Athena, Aphrodite, and Artemis. Of these Hephaestus, Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Athena, Aphrodite, and Artemis were female deities. Zeus was the head of the pantheon, the king

of gods. His weapon was a thunderbolt. Poseidon was the elder brother of Zeus and the god of the sea. Apollo was the son of Zeus and was considered to be extremely handsome. Apollo was associated with archery, prophecies, song and music. Hera was the wife of Zeus. Originally she had been a mother-goddess. Demeter had also been a mother-goddess and was later worshipped as the goddess of grain, especially wheat. An important festival, the Eleusinian Festival, was celebrated in her honour in Attica. Eleusis, near Athens, had a large temple of Demeter. The Greek cities adopted particular gods or goddesses as their patron deities. Athena was the patron goddess of Athens. This does not mean that the worship of Athena was confined to Athens alone. The patron deities might enjoy a special status in the respective cities which had chosen them, but they were worshipped in other states also. Homer portrayed the Olympian divinities as having almost human characteristics and emotions. The gods and goddesses had their loves, their jealousies, their rivalries, their conflicts and their struggles for power.

Greek religion was not dominated by a priestly class. There were priests, but they did not monopolize religious rituals and ceremonies. The minor role of the priests had been further reduced by the Classical Period. Public religious events were the concern of the state. There were some aristocratic clans which traditionally supplied the priests for these occasions, but over a period of time ordinary citizens too got the right to conduct official rituals. A few priestly positions became elective posts. It was not always necessary for specialists in ritual to carry out rites at collective public worship of gods and goddesses.

Public worship took on the shape of festivals in which people from the entire *polis*, or from an entire region, would participate. There would be sacrifices of animals and the meat would be distributed among the participants. Music, theatre, poetry-recitation, and sports were an integral part of these festivals. Greek drama owes its origin to some of these festivals where plays were enacted in the course of the celebration. The Homeric epics were recited at the festival

of Athena (called 'Panathenaea') in Athens. Similarly, the Olympic games were organized at the time of the festival of Zeus held in Olympia (the Olympian plain where this festival was held is in the Peloponnese and should not be confused with Mount Olympus in Thessaly). The Olympian festival was held every four years and was probably well established by the beginning of the Archaic Period (776 BC is the traditional date of the first Olympiad). Athletic competitions took place at this festival and attracted contestants from all over Greece. Some of the other notable festivals where such games were held were the festival of Apollo at Delphi and the festival of Poseidon in Corinth.

The Greeks constructed temples dedicated to their gods and goddesses. The temples were regarded as abodes of the respective deities. The worshippers did not go inside the temple for religious ceremonies. The ritual was performed outside the temple, usually in the open. The construction of elaborate temples stimulated Greek architecture. Some of the finest examples of classical Greek architecture are the temples of this period. In the age of Pericles the Athenians produced a number of architectural masterpieces. A huge temple dedicated to the Olympian deities was built at this time. This temple, called the Parthenon, is a vast structure with a high roof resting on numerous pillars. The Parthenon was decorated with beautiful sculpture. Since arches were unknown to Greek architecture, heavy roofs of large buildings had to be supported by pillars which were placed close to each other. The use of the arch permits wider space between supporting pillars. This is why buildings like the Parthenon were so overcrowded with pillars. Nevertheless the Greeks tried to relieve the monotony of the pillars by introducing varied designs for them. Distinctive styles of pillars came to denote architectural styles, e.g. Corinthian, Doric and Ionic.

Apart from public worship, usually sponsored by the state, there were private religious ceremonies in which individuals or families appealed to particular deities for various purposes. The ceremony might just consist of a ritual

sacrifice to propitiate a god or goddess. As we have noted there were also mystical cults which believed in a more personal relationship with the divine. Moreover, there were local deities and older mother-goddess cults which coexisted with the Olympian gods. The cult of the bull (worship and sacrifice of bulls), which was widespread in Greece since Minoan times, remained an enduring feature of Greek religion at all levels.

Another aspect of Greek religion was the practice of seeking intimation of one's future and advice from a god. It was held that the gods revealed the future in the form of signs which could only be interpreted by specialists. These specialists were associated with certain sacred places called oracles. The oracle at Delphi was famous throughout Greece. This was an ancient shrine of Apollo which had a stone known as the *omphalos*. The *omphalos* was regarded by the Greeks as the navel or centre of the world. Apollo was the god of prophecies and oracles and it was he who communicated the will of the gods to humans through the priests of Delphi. There were other oracles as well.

In the Archaic Period another god was added to the group of Olympian deities. This god was Dionysus. The rise of the Dionysus cult is one of the most fascinating aspects of Greek religion in this period. The worship of Dionysus was rooted in the remote past. It was a major cult at the popular level, but was not patronized by the aristocracy for which reason Homer did not include Dionysus among the Olympian gods. But it was too powerful a cult to be easily ignored. It is generally recognized that the Dionysus cult originated among the more primitive communities of Thrace and then spread to other parts of Greece during the Archaic Period. By the Classical Period it had been fully incorporated into Greek religion and had been endorsed by the ruling classes. There were various facets of Dionysus. He was the god of wine, pleasure and intoxication. He was also called Bacchus. Besides, he was the god of tragic art. The Dionysus cult had a large following among women. The practices of the cult involved drinking of wine, wild dancing, and going

into an ecstatic state. Dionysus was the principal deity of the Orphics. Orphism, with its emphasis on mysticism, represents the mystical side of the Dionysus cult.

In the late Archaic Period Dionysus was raised to the status of an Olympian god. The evidence suggests that at the same time the goddess Hestia was dropped from the Olympian pantheon. In the Classical Period festivals of Dionysus became major cultural events. Plays, especially tragedies, would be performed at these festivals. The Dionysian festivals gave birth to the great tradition of Greek tragedy. Classical drama reached its peak in the fifth century BC. Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were the masters of tragedy while Aristophanes wrote comedies. The plays made use of Greek myths and legends for their themes, but some of them also commented on contemporary society. *Oedipus the King*, written by Sophocles, is a fine example of the vast literary output of the classical age. The Macedonian triumph at Chaeronea under Philip II (338 BC) wiped out the independence of the Greek states. As a political entity the *polis* ceased to exist after 338 BC. The Greek states were absorbed within the Macedonian empire. Philip was assassinated two years after this event. In 336 BC Alexander succeeded his father as the ruler of Macedonia. Unlike the rest of Greece, Macedonia had a strong monarchical state which could mobilize the resources for a highly efficient standing army. The troops came mainly from Macedonia itself. These included excellent riders. The cavalry was a crucial wing of the army. The Macedonians had recruited skilled archers from Crete. The spear used by this army was longer than that of the hoplites. The size of the spear had been increased from 8 feet to 14 feet, while the size of the shield and the weight of the armour was reduced. The overall speed of the Macedonian formations was much faster than that of the Greek hoplite infantry. However Macedonia was culturally and

economically a backward area as compared to southern Greece.

Alexander launched a massive expansionist programme following his accession. His primary aim was to destroy Persian power in West Asia so as to consolidate Macedonian rule over the entire region. By 330 BC Alexander had conquered the Persian empire after defeating Darius III (last of the Persian emperors), and had annexed Mesopotamia and Egypt to his territories. His subsequent campaigns brought him to the banks of the Indus. Alexander died at Babylon in 323 BC. The eastward expansion of the Macedonian empire under Alexander had made Anatolia, Syria, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Iran, Afghanistan and some parts of Central Asia and north-west India Greek ruled territories. Following the death of Alexander some of the outlying regions of the empire were lost but the greater part of Alexander's territories remained under Greek control.

Alexander had left no heir to his vast empire and had made no arrangements for appointing a successor. A bitter power struggle among his leading military commanders ensued which lasted almost till 275 BC. The empire was eventually partitioned among three of Alexander's generals—Seleucus, Ptolemy and Antigonus. The dynasties of these generals ruled over their respective portions of the empire: the Seleucids in Persia (mainly Iran and Iraq); the Ptolemies in Egypt; and the Antigonids in Macedonia. While Seleucid control over Persia was relatively shortlived, the Antigonids ruled over Macedonia till the Romans extended their hegemony over Macedonia and Greece between 196 and 146 BC. The Ptolemies remained in power in Egypt till 30 BC when Cleopatra, the last ruler of the dynasty, was defeated by the Romans.

The period from the death of Alexander and the founding of the Seleucid, Ptolemaic and Antigonid empires down to the time when Rome became the supreme power in the eastern Mediterranean (c. 300 to 30 BC) is referred to as the Hellenistic age. The successor states which came into existence as a result of the division of Alexander's empire

are called Hellenistic kingdoms. The Hellenistic kingdoms were governed by a Greek ruling elite and Greek became the official language of Persia, West Asia, Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean. Greek also became the chief language of intellectual discourse in this area. The Hellenistic kingdoms created conditions for disseminating the accomplishments of classical Greek civilization over a large part of West Asia and in Egypt. Since the Asian and north African territories of the Hellenistic kingdoms were centres of grand ancient civilizations, the Greek ruling classes of these empires adopted several customs of their subjects. This gave rise to a dynamic cultural tradition which may be conveniently labelled as Hellenistic civilization. (The civilization of Greece proper, especially during the Archaic and Classical Periods, is called *Hellenic* civilization, while the civilization of the Hellenistic kingdoms is called *Hellenistic* civilization).

To the east of these kingdoms the Hellenistic world had a live contact with India. Ever since Alexander's invasion there was a Greek presence in Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan and north-west India. The impact of this Greek presence on Indian art and culture left its imprint on early Buddhist art. It is generally recognized that the Gandhara and Mathura schools adopted several Hellenistic/Greek motifs. Moreover, the Indo-Greek heirs of Alexander in north-west India have left behind vital literary and numismatic evidence (coins) which is crucial for reconstructing the history of the post-Asokan period.

The interaction of the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Persian, Central Asian, Anatolian and Greek civilizations produced a rich synthesis which found expression in the culture of the Hellenistic kingdoms. New centres of learning came up in this period. The city of Alexandria (initially founded by Alexander), on the north-western coast of Egypt, replaced Athens as the leading city of thinkers and scholars. Alexandria was a major Mediterranean port too. The first two Ptolemies initiated the setting up of libraries maintained at state expense where scholarly works of the Hellenistic

world were preserved and copied. The library at Alexandria was renowned for its enormous collection of books. This city attracted thinkers, scientists, mathematicians and historians from all over the Mediterranean region. Students came to Alexandria for schooling and instruction in various branches of knowledge.

Archimedes, best known for his discovery of the law of physics called 'Archimedes' Principle' (pertaining to the displacement of liquids), was a product of Alexandria. Another distinguished scholar of Alexandria was the geometrician Euclid. Euclid's compilation of geometrical theorems (it was through this book that the theorem of Pythagoras has come down to us) remained the standard textbook for students of geometry down to modern times. Besides Alexandria, many other Hellenistic cities, for example Pergamum in Anatolia, had large libraries which promoted the exchange of ideas and knowledge. Although Athens had lost its former glory, it still retained its reputation for philosophical ideas. The two leading schools of thought in the Hellenistic period were those of the Stoics and the Epicureans. The philosopher Zeno was the founder of Stoicism, and Epicurius was the founder of Epicureanism. Both these philosophers taught at Athens. Of these two schools of thought, the Stoics had a bigger following than the Epicureans in the Hellenistic age.

By the time Roman hegemony was established in the Mediterranean, the Hellenistic world had a truly composite culture. It was this composite culture which became the basis for classical Rome. For a very long time major inputs for this culture came from the east—Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Anatolia, Iraq, Iran and even north-west India. In the words of W.W. Tarn, 'the Greece that taught Rome was not the older Greece but contemporary Hellenism'. We will discuss Roman civilization in the following two chapters.

Chapter Eight

ANCIENT ROME-I

THE civilization of Rome succeeded that of Greece as the major ancient European civilization. The nucleus of the Roman social formation was Italy, and later, the entire Mediterranean. Food production had developed in southern Italy c. 7000 BC, and in northern Italy c. 6000 BC. By 2000 BC Italy was inhabited by several tribes, many of which had an Indo-European origin. We have already noted in the previous chapter that there were a number of Greek settlements in southern Italy. Two major groups of Indo-European tribes were to be found in central and northern Italy. In the western portion of central Italy were people who spoke Latin and related dialects. The middle of the peninsula is dominated by the Apennine mountains (referred to as 'the backbone of Italy') extending from northern to central Italy. This region was the domain of another group of Indo-Europeans, the Osco-Umbrians. The Osco-Umbrians comprised tribes which spoke Oscan, Umbrian, or languages which had a close affinity with Oscan. The Oscan-speaking tribes were also referred to as Sabellians. There were two major tribes in the area which were linked to the Oscans/Sabellians and spoke Oscan dialects. These were the Sabines and the Samnites, both of which played an important role in the early history of Rome. Some of the Oscans/Sabellians gradually spread to the west coast and took over the very fertile region of Campania. The

Volsci and the Aequi were ancient tribes which lived on the periphery of the Latin zone (Latium). In the eastern part of Italy, Indo-European tribes which spoke Venetic and Messapic were prominent. The northernmost part of Italy contained Celtic tribes like the Gauls. The main non-Indo-European people of Italy were the Etruscans. The Etruscans were concentrated in north-western and central Italy and their territories extended into Latium.

From c. 1200 BC Italian bronze age cultures appeared in the Apennine region. The most well-known of these cultures was the Villanovan culture which was first identified at the site of Villanova lying north of the Apennines. By c. 1000 BC there were several Villanovan bronze age settlements in northern Italy. The Villanovans were primarily villagers and relied on sheep and cattle-breeding. They had a regular cycle of migration between the mountainous areas and the more fertile plains in the west.

Around 800 BC there were some new trends. The area inhabited by the Etruscans was rapidly undergoing a transition which led to urbanization and the growth of an agricultural economy based on the exploitation of the fertile plains of north-western and central Italy. From the eighth century BC the use of iron became widespread. The Etruscans, who may be regarded as the most advanced people of pre-Roman Italy, produced a rich civilization between 800 and 700 BC. During this period they occupied most of central Italy. Several Etruscan cities came into existence. Veii, Tarquinii and Vulci were some of the prominent Etruscan urban centres.

The Etruscans did not create a politically unified state but lived in self-governed cities with their own independent territories. Many of these cities had mixed populations of Etruscans and diverse Italian Indo-European tribes. The cities were dominated by a wealthy Etruscan warrior aristocracy. Some of the Etruscan cities (city-states) were ruled by kings. We find considerable social differentiation in these cities. The rulers lived in palatial houses. The Etruscan aristocracy built huge stone tombs with large

chambers for burial. The walls of these chambers were decorated with paintings which exhibit the affluent lifestyle of the aristocracy. Beautiful objects made of silver, bronze and ivory were buried with dead bodies in these tombs.

The Etruscan towns were well-planned and fortified. They contained drains and had carefully laid out streets. The Etruscans adopted several features of Hellenic (Greek) civilization, including a script which was based on the Greek alphabet. They engaged in trade and had extensive commercial dealings with Greek cities. The Etruscans had a profound influence on the Latin speaking people whose territories in west-central Italy frequently overlapped with the centres of Etruscan civilization. A few Latin villages had grown into towns. Some of the Latin towns were fortified along the pattern of Etruscan cities. Rome was one such Latin city. Praeneste was another urban centre in Latium.

The foundation of the city of Rome was traditionally supposed to have taken place in 753 BC. According to the traditional history of the city, settlements on seven hills along the river Tiber (these seven hills are: Aventine, Caelian, Capitoline, Esquiline, Palatine, Quirinal and Viminal) were enclosed by a wall in 753 BC. This marked the beginning of the city and Roman dates were often reckoned from this event. Many Roman chronologists used the era starting in 753 (AUC or *Ab Urbe Condita*, i.e. 'since the founding of the city'). However, the historicity of this date has not been established. It is much more likely that the seven hills of Rome were fortified at a later period. The archaeological evidence suggests that the city was first fortified c. 550 BC. Possibly it is around this time that the population of the settlements on the seven hills began to expand. The area at the bottom of these hills was covered with marshes and swamps which had to be drained before the low lying foothills could be occupied. Once the marshes had been cleared and a wall was erected, the rural settlements were soon transformed into a major urban centre.

The early history of Rome is somewhat obscure. It seems that the city borrowed several elements of Etruscan social

and political organization. The Etruscanization of Rome was speeded up by the fact that some Etruscan families became politically dominant in the city. Rome acquired a monarchical form of government and for some time it was ruled by kings who were of Etruscan origin. Not much is known about the political history of the monarchical period. We do not even possess a list of all the kings. Although later historians provided names of some of the Etruscan rulers of Rome, it is difficult to corroborate these names on the basis of contemporary sources. It is not clear whether these kings belonged to a single dynasty. There were some rulers who bore the name Tarquin.

In 510 BC monarchy came to an abrupt end in Rome. Two events occurred simultaneously. Firstly, the Etruscan king Tarquin the Proud (Tarquinius Superbus) was overthrown. This marked the end of Etruscan rule over Rome. Secondly, monarchy was abolished. Rome ceased to have a monarchical form of government and became a republic. 510 BC is the traditional date for the beginning of the Roman republic. The movement against Tarquin was not just directed against Etruscan rule, but against the very institution of kingship. Subsequently Tarquin the Proud tried to restore monarchy at Rome with the help of Lars Porsenna, the ruler of the neighbouring state of Chiusi. This attempt failed. Henceforth the city was not ruled by a king (*rex* was the Roman title for king) but by an oligarchy consisting of the wealthy Latin aristocracy of Rome. The government was headed by *two* consuls who were elected annually. The main instrument of aristocratic power was the oligarchical council or senate. The senate emerged as the supreme body of the Roman state with extensive political, legal and military authority. There were also assemblies of citizens, though at the beginning of the republic they had virtually no share in governance. The Roman republic lasted from 510 to 27 BC. During this long period of nearly five centuries there were significant changes in the structure of the republic. Before examining the history of the Roman republic it would be useful to briefly outline the territorial expansion of Rome.

I

For over two centuries, from c. 500 to 280 BC, Rome was engaged in bringing the entire Italian peninsula under its control. The first phase of Roman expansion was in central Italy, primarily in Latium. Rome forged an alliance with the Latin speaking people whereby the Romans were able to extend their influence to the Latin communities. This alliance provided the Romans with the resources to resist invasions by the Etruscans, the Sabines, the Volsci and the Aequi. The turning point in the struggle against the non-Latin states came in 396 BC when Rome managed to occupy the Etruscan city of Veii. Veii, situated close to Rome, had for a long time been the major rival of Rome. The conquest of Veii gave the Romans access to more territories in central Italy. Further, with the land and other resources of Veii at its disposal, Rome could now assert itself more aggressively over its neighbours.

At this point Roman expansion was briefly halted due to a major setback caused by the invasion of Italy by Celtic tribes from the north. Over a period of time Celtic speaking Indo-European tribes, especially the Gauls, had penetrated northern Italy. Between c. 450 and 350 BC they occupied the area between the Alps and the river Po. In 390 BC the Celts (Gauls) entered and plundered Rome. After this invasion the city had to be rebuilt. A new defensive wall was constructed. By the middle of the fourth century BC the Romans had recovered and they launched a vigorous expansionist programme. They started by tightening their grip over their Latin allies. This was resisted by the Latin states resulting in a series of Roman campaigns in Latium. These campaigns lasted till 338 BC by which date Rome succeeded in subduing the Latin states. Rome now attempted to bring other parts of Italy under its rule. Its first target was the fertile plain of Campania. This new phase of expansion involved fiercely fought wars with neighbouring communities. Rome was continuously at war with the Samnites till 295 BC before it could consolidate its position in central Italy. By 295 BC the Romans had also brought most of the Etruscan territories

under their control. After this they focused their attention on southern Italy.

The Greek states of southern Italy strongly opposed Roman expansion into the area. One of the Greek states of southern Italy which decided to confront Rome was the state of Tarentum. In 282 BC hostilities broke out between Rome and Tarentum. Tarentum appealed to other Greek states for assistance. Pyrrhus, the ruler of Epirus (a state in the northwest part of mainland Greece), responded to this request. Pyrrhus had been trying to unify the Western Greeks for a struggle against Rome and he now mobilized troops to prevent the Romans from taking over southern Italy. Initially he was successful, but the early victories of Pyrrhus were at a very great cost in terms of men and resources (hence the term 'pyrrhic victory', i.e. a victory won at such a great cost that it cannot really be regarded as a victory). Eventually the Romans defeated Pyrrhus in 275 BC and southern Italy came under their control. This completed the first major phase of Roman expansion. At the end of this phase the entire Italian peninsula had accepted Roman supremacy.

The conquest of southern Italy brought the Romans to the edge of the western Mediterranean and face-to-face with the large island of Sicily off the southwestern tip of Italy. The western Mediterranean had been dominated by the state of Carthage for several centuries. In chapter six we noted that Carthage was a Phoenician settlement. This settlement had grown into a vast Carthaginian empire. Sicily was a Carthaginian territory. Phoenician traders from the eastern Mediterranean city-state of Tyre (on the Syrian-Lebanese coast) are supposed to have set up a trading outpost at Carthage in the ninth century BC. The traditional date for the founding of the settlement is 814 BC, although scholars are of the view that it was founded somewhat later. Carthage (Kart-Hadasht), situated close to modern Tunis on the north African coast, lies almost midway between the eastern and western Mediterranean. The excellent location of the site gave the Phoenician traders of Carthage an opportunity to

act as intermediaries in the trade between the two parts of the Mediterranean. The Carthaginian traders built up a vast commercial network and opened up trade with communities in northwest Africa and Spain.

The economic prosperity of Carthage was not merely based on trade, but also on the exploitation of the resources of the Tunisian hinterland. From the fifth century BC the Phoenicians began to develop agriculture in the fertile interior of Tunisia which lay south of Carthage. The Carthaginians then went on to create an empire which included southern Spain, Sardinia, Corsica, Sicily, and territories in north Africa. The tribute which was realized from these possessions added to the immense wealth of Carthage. Carthage maintained an efficient army which was recruited from all over the Mediterranean. Carthage, like most Phoenician states, was ruled by an oligarchy which was dominated by rich merchants. Two magistrates, called *shophets*, were chosen annually from among this oligarchy. The *shophets* were the chief officials of the state. Carthage adopted many features of Greek and Hellenistic civilization in the development of its culture.

When Rome attempted to gain control over Sicily, it naturally came into conflict with Carthage. Roman expansion into the Mediterranean could only have taken place at the expense of Carthage. For over a century Rome fought a series of wars against the Carthaginians. These wars are known as the Punic Wars (the word Punic is etymologically linked to Phoenician). There were three Punic wars: the First Punic War (264-241 BC); the Second Punic War (218-201 BC); and the Third Punic War (149-146 BC). Of these three wars, the Second Punic War was the most fierce contest between Rome and Carthage. The prolonged wars against Carthage were a huge drain on the financial and human resources of Rome. Nevertheless, the Punic Wars resulted in the total annihilation of Carthage and the acquisition of overseas territories by the Romans.

The First Punic War, which started soon after the Roman victory over Pyrrhus and the Western Greeks, lasted from

264 to 241 BC. At the end of this war Carthage was forced to surrender Sicily to the Romans. Sicily became the first 'province' of Rome. Roman provinces were specific administrative units of the Roman empire (it needs to be clarified here that when we use the term 'Roman empire' in the context of the republican period we are only referring to a large territorial unit, and not to empire as a type of state ruled by an emperor). Those Roman territories *outside* Italy which were directly administered by Rome were organized as provinces. Roman provinces were distinct from protectorates, which were not directly governed by Rome. Sicily was the first overseas territory to be organized as a province.

After the First Punic War the Phoenicians took steps to strengthen themselves militarily so as to check Roman expansionism. The main architect of Carthaginian military reorganization was a brilliant general named Hannibal. Hannibal mobilized a large and well-trained army for waging a war against Rome. Instead of attacking Rome by the sea from the south, he worked out a bold plan to march across western Europe to the Alpine mountains in northern Italy. In 218 BC (which marks the beginning of the Second Punic War) Hannibal reached the Alps with an army of about 40,000 troops with the objective of launching an offensive against the Romans from the north. This was something that the Romans were totally unprepared for. Hannibal successfully crossed the high altitude Alpine mountains with his large army and entered northern Italy. Here he made an alliance with several communities which had been subjugated by the Romans. Hannibal marched southwards in the direction of Rome and in 216 BC he completely routed the Roman army at Cannae in south Italy. However he was not successful in capturing the city of Rome.

The defeat at Cannae was a big blow for the Romans. It took them some time to recover from this shock. When they had regrouped their army the Romans launched a campaign against Hannibal. The leader of this campaign was Scipio Africanus. Hannibal was compelled to retreat from Italy.

Scipio then entered Spain and pushed back the Carthaginian army. Hannibal had to rush to north Africa to defend Carthaginian possessions there. Hannibal's army was finally defeated at the battle of Zama, near Carthage, in 202 BC. The Second Punic War ended in 201 BC with Carthage accepting Roman peace terms. Carthage had to surrender its territories in Spain. Spain (mainly the Mediterranean coast of Spain at this time) became another Roman province. In addition, Carthage had to destroy its naval fleet and was made to give a large sum to Rome as compensation for the war. Carthage ceased to be a major power after this, while Rome now dominated the western Mediterranean. After the Second Punic War the Romans ruthlessly subjugated the communities in the northern parts of Italy which had provided assistance to Hannibal. These communities included the Gauls who lived in the area between the Alps and the river Po. This region, which contained the fertile Po valley, was called Cisalpine Gaul. Roman rule now extended to Cisalpine Gaul.

Once Rome had become the foremost power in the western Mediterranean it turned towards the eastern Mediterranean. The political situation in this region was favourable for Roman expansion. Rome sought to take advantage of the weakening of Hellenistic states in the last quarter of the third century BC (see chapter seven). The Hellenistic kingdoms of Macedonia, Egypt and West Asia, ruled by the Antigonids, Ptolemids and Seleucids respectively, dominated the eastern Mediterranean. Of these three kingdoms, Egypt was the most stable and had managed to keep most of its original possessions intact. The Macedonians were facing problems of which the Romans took advantage, whereas the Seleucids had lost most of their territories in the east. The Seleucids had to give up Iran and Iraq to the Parthians (whom we will discuss in more detail below), and independent principalities had been established in those parts of Anatolia which were earlier ruled by the Seleucids. The Seleucid kingdom was just confined to Syria and at the time of the Second Punic War Antiochus III was

the reigning king of the Seleucid dynasty. Philip V of the Antigonid dynasty was his contemporary in Macedonia.

Roman expansion into the eastern Mediterranean was directly linked to developments during and immediately after the Second Punic War. Hannibal had come to an understanding with Philip V of Macedonia who was hostile to Rome. Macedonia was resentful of growing Roman interference in its internal affairs. The Romans sent troops across the Adriatic Sea to safeguard the eastern (Adriatic) coastline of Italy. Since the troops were stationed in the Macedonian sphere of influence, a confrontation between Rome and Macedonia ensued. Coinciding with the Second Punic War, the Romans also fought a war against Macedonia. The war with Macedonia continued after the Punic war and in 196 BC Philip V was defeated. It needs to be mentioned here that the Greek states formed part of the Macedonian kingdom. In 196 BC, following the defeat of Philip V, the Romans declared that the Greek states were independent of Macedonia. After 196 BC Rome tightened its grip over the Greek states.

Even after their defeat in the Second Punic War the Carthaginians had not given up their opposition to Rome. Hannibal (who was alive till 182 BC) carried out a series of reforms aimed at improving the condition of the state. He held the office of *shophet* (chief magistrate) of Carthage in 197 and 196 BC. During his tenure he curtailed the authority of the ruling oligarchy. He strengthened his alliance with Philip V by forging ties with Antiochus III of Syria. Rome looked upon Hannibal's actions with growing suspicion and began to exert pressure against him. Hannibal was forced to leave Carthage and seek shelter with Antiochus III. This became the pretext for a successful Roman campaign against Syria. The Roman campaign was essentially prompted by the fact that the Seleucids still had some influence over parts of Anatolia and Eastern Greek states. The defeat of Antiochus III in 189 BC enabled Rome to consolidate its hold over Greece. Antiochus III was allowed to retain Syria but Rome now emerged as a major force in West Asian politics.

The formal annexation of Syria by the Romans was completed more than a century later.

Having dealt with Antiochus III the Romans once again shifted their attention to Macedonia. Yet another war was waged against the Macedonian kingdom, which was now ruled by the successor of Philip V. At the conclusion of this war (referred to as the Third Macedonian War, 172-167 BC) the king was removed and Macedonia was split into four republics which had to pay tribute to Rome. The final phase of the Roman subjugation of Macedonia took place simultaneously with the Third Punic War of 149-146 BC.

While Rome had been busy with eastern Mediterranean affairs the Carthaginians had been successful in reviving their trade. On the other hand there was a very powerful lobby at Rome which had been demanding that the state of Carthage should be completely destroyed. It was in this situation that the Third Punic War broke out in 149 BC. By 146 BC Carthage had been defeated and it ceased to exist. The territory of Carthage in Tunisia was reorganized as the Roman province of Africa (not to be confused with the continent of Africa). As for Macedonia, there were anti-Roman upheavals in the newly formed republics, as well as in Greece, while the Third Punic War was going on. The Romans crushed these upheavals and annexed the whole of Macedonia in 147 BC. The Greek rebellion was also suppressed and Corinth was destroyed in 146 BC. In fact Corinth and Carthage were destroyed by the Romans in the same year (146 BC).

Macedonia became a Roman province while the Greek states were placed under indirect Roman rule. The Macedonian province was to supervise the administration of the Greek states. By this time Egypt had also been made a Roman protectorate, i. e. its foreign policy was guided by the Romans. Western Anatolia had come under Roman rule and was organized as the province of Asia (not to be confused with the continent of Asia). Thus, by the middle of the second century BC Roman influence was predominant in the entire Mediterranean. Of course Syria, Palestine,

Egypt and some parts of north Africa had not yet been annexed. The next phase of large-scale expansion was closely linked to the internal politics of Rome which we will discuss in the next section.

II

When the Etruscan monarchy was ousted from Rome in 510 BC political power passed into the hands of the aristocracy. The aristocracy initially set up an oligarchical government. The oligarchy exercised its power through an oligarchical council, called the senate. Throughout the Roman republic the senate was the single most important centre of authority. However, as we shall see, the senate was gradually forced to share some of its authority with other institutions.

We should bear in mind that it is not possible to speak with much certainty about the chronology of the early republic. A few scholars like A. Alföldi have argued that after the Second Punic War some Roman writers produced historical accounts of the early republic in which Romans were shown to have been a great and superior people at a very early date. The purpose of these accounts was to demonstrate that Rome had always enjoyed a preeminent position. In the process, the chronology of early Roman history was pushed back. According to Alföldi we actually know very little about early Rome. Much of our information is based on the work of Fabius Pictor. Pictor was a Roman historian who participated in the Second Punic War. He produced a history of Rome written in the Greek language and intended primarily for a Greek audience. Alföldi is of the opinion that Pictor fabricated a chronology to glorify early Rome. This chronology placed the rise of Rome in the sixth century whereas actually Rome became prominent at least a century later. But most scholars have not accepted this argument and have drawn attention to the difficulties that would be created if the chronology was revised, particularly as the sequence of certain events cannot be reconciled with later dates. Nevertheless there has been

some scepticism over dates like that of the founding of the Roman republic. It has, for instance, been noted that it is too much of a coincidence that the date for the end of monarchy at Rome (510 BC) is precisely the same as that of the establishment of classical democracy at Athens after the overthrow of the tyrant Hippias.

What we are certain about is that right from the beginning of the republic, there was an intense struggle between the landed aristocracy and the common people of Rome. Roman society was clearly divided along class lines and the less privileged sections, particularly the ordinary peasants, resented the monopoly of political power which the aristocracy enjoyed. This resulted in a prolonged conflict. As in the case of the Greek states, the Roman aristocracy was not in a position to completely suppress the struggle of the peasantry and this struggle became a recurring feature of the republic throughout its history.

To begin with, the aristocracy lacked the resources to mobilize a large standing army consisting of professional warrior and could not therefore effectively deal with the unrest among the peasantry. Moreover, Roman military organization was heavily dependent on the peasants who constituted the main fighting force. The Roman army comprised unpaid soldiers who were primarily recruited from the peasantry. These soldiers, like the Greek hoplites, had to supply their own fighting equipment and had to utilize their own means to sustain themselves for the duration of a campaign. All able-bodied adult males had to render military service. We have seen that this was the pattern of military organization in ancient Greece as well. The military burden on the Roman peasantry was several times more due to the sheer scale of Roman expansion which was almost unprecedented in antiquity. We should remember that Rome kept on acquiring new territories for over six centuries. Of these six centuries nearly four hundred years were spent annexing territories outside Italy, some of them in far-flung areas of Europe, West Asia and northern Africa.

Rome required a huge army not only to create its empire but also to maintain and defend it. It is not difficult to see why the peasantry could not be ignored. The Roman aristocracy, having failed in the early years of the republic to concentrate enough wealth in its hands to form a professional standing army financed by the state, had to seek the support of the peasantry to defend the city from the onslaught of neighbouring tribes (Etruscans, Volsci, Aequi, Sabellians, Gauls etc.) and subsequently to expand into central Italy. The successful resistance put up by the peasantry against the attempt by the aristocracy to monopolize political power was itself an important factor which was responsible for the failure of the aristocracy to create a political and military structure that could be controlled exclusively by the rich. As Rome began to expand, the need to have the support of the peasant soldiers increased. Initially the peasantry also derived some small benefits from this expansion. For instance when the Etruscan city of Veii was conquered in 396 BC, a lot of land in and around Veii was distributed among the poorer Roman peasants. This gave these peasants the means to procure military equipment for later campaigns. At the same time it has to be emphasized that the aristocracy was the biggest beneficiary of Roman expansion. The growth of the empire made the aristocracy fabulously wealthy and widened the gap between rich and poor.

In the early phase of Roman expansion the aristocracy was fully dependent upon the peasant soldiers. And it was in this phase, i. e. when Rome was engaged in conquering the Italian peninsula, that the peasantry extracted major political concessions. Through these concessions *a small section of the peasantry* got some share in political power. To understand the nature of these concessions we have to examine the evolution of the Roman republic and see how the conflict between the aristocracy and the peasantry modified the structure of the Roman state.

As already mentioned, the senate became the most important body of the Roman state after monarchy was

abolished. Under the kings the Roman senate had functioned as an advisory council. The senate was a council of elders, consisting of heads of prominent families. After 510 BC the aristocracy ruled over Rome through the senate. At the beginning of the republic the senate was an oligarchical body from which the common people were completely excluded. Here we must make a reference to a peculiar feature of Roman society. Roman society was divided into two groups or 'orders': the patrician order and the plebeian order. The patricians constituted a small close-knit elite while the plebeians were the common people. Nevertheless both the orders were included in the category of Roman citizens (we will discuss the nature of Roman citizenship later). To a large extent the struggle between the aristocracy and the peasantry was a struggle between the patricians and the plebeians and is often referred to as 'the conflict of the orders'.

Patrician social organization was based on kinship groups called *gentes* (singular, *gens*), which may be regarded as the Roman equivalent of clans. Each *gens* traced its origin to a common ancestor. The division of the Romans into two orders shares a few similarities with the Indian caste system. This division had a permanency which resembles the permanency of being born into a particular caste. A citizen was *born* a patrician or a plebeian. One could not become a patrician merely by acquiring wealth or political power. Kinship and marriage too were closely linked with the division of Roman society into two orders. Till 445 BC marriages between patricians and plebeians were prohibited by law and for a long time after that such marriages were rare.

Historians are not very sure as to whether the existence of the two orders was a prominent feature of pre-republican Rome. Some scholars have suggested that at some point of time, during the period of monarchy, citizenship rights extended only to the patricians, but most historians have rejected this view. It is generally recognized that in the early republic the patricians formed an exclusive aristocratic group. Entry into the patrician order was practically

impossible for non-patricians. A person had to be born into a patrician *gens* and had to be the offspring of a marriage which was recognized as valid by Roman law. Kinship ties played a particularly important role at the level of patrician social organization. Their closed kinship structure was so strictly regulated that during the course of the republic the number of *gentes* was steadily decreasing. The evidence indicates that in the fifth century BC there had been 50 *gentes* in all. By c. 367 BC the number of *gentes* had diminished to 22 *gentes*, divided into 81 families. At the end of the republic the number had fallen to 14 *gentes* with 30 families. Some of the most renowned *gentes* were Aemilia, Claudia, Cornelia, Fabia and Julia (the middle name of a Roman was that of the *gentes*; thus Gaius Julius Caesar—the famous Julius Caesar—belonged to the *gens* Julia). Patrician *gentes* were patrilineal (i.e. descent was determined in the male line) and rigidly patriarchal. Even after the restriction on patrician-plebeian marriages was removed, the offspring of a marriage between a patrician woman and a plebeian man was not regarded as a patrician. On the other hand children of a patrician father and plebeian mother would be patricians.

Whereas the Roman orders were not, strictly speaking, classes, it is nevertheless true that the patricians were the economically, politically and socially dominant group. Orders might not have been classes but they approximated to classes. During the last phase of the republic a small section of the plebeians was given a share in political power, but the vast majority of them remained a deprived class with very little control over land or other means of production. For most, to be born a plebeian meant belonging to an underprivileged class. On the other hand, being born a patrician meant automatic access to wealth, political power and a high social and ritual status. Patricians were able to exercise a high degree of control over Roman religion. Many of the important priesthoods remained closed to the plebeians even after sections of the plebeians had forced the patricians to make major political concessions.

When the republic came into existence the patricians converted the senate into an exclusive oligarchical institution for governing Rome. Membership of the senate was by cooption, i.e. the original members themselves chose additional or new members of the senate. The original members must have been those who took over the Roman state after the overthrow of Tarquin the Proud. *Only patrician males could be members of the senate.* In the early republic the senate had 300 members. In the later republic the number went up to 600 and then to 900 and was eventually stabilized at 600 after the republic came to an end. A person who had been made a member of the senate remained senator for the rest of his life. The senate had wide-ranging powers, most of which were not formally defined. It gave duties to the magistrates (but did not elect them), advised them on legislation, financial and military matters, and generally supervised the functioning of the state. Juries for major trials, especially criminal trials, were composed of senators. The overwhelming majority of the senators were big landowners. Senators wore a distinctive dress with a wide purple-coloured border (*laticlavia*). They were not allowed to go out of Italy without the permission of the senate and were expected to be regularly available to attend sessions of the senate.

The highest officials of the Roman republic were called consuls. There were two consuls and they held office simultaneously. The consulship was an elective post and elections took place on an annual basis. The two consuls remained in office for one year after which fresh elections were held. Roman years were usually named after the consuls for the respective years. The authority of the Roman state was vested in the consuls. They presided over the senate and performed executive, judicial and military functions. We know that in the later years of the republic the minimum age for consulship was forty-two years. Consuls could seek re-election without any restrictions. Till 367 BC only patricians could be consuls. One of the important demands of the plebeians in the conflict of the orders during

the early republic had been that plebeians should also be allowed to hold the office of consul. In 367 BC *one* of the consulships was opened to the plebeians. For a long time this provision remained a mere formality because the patricians controlled the electoral process and could manipulate the choice of candidates. It was only in the late republic that plebeians actually started getting elected to the consulship.

Besides the consuls there were several other magistrates who looked after various aspects of administration. Mention may be made of two very powerful magistrates who were called censors. Two censors were elected once in every five years. They held office for eighteen months. During the eighteen months that they held office the two censors were required to conduct a census of Roman citizens. The censors recorded the names of citizens and the amount of property possessed by each citizen (only the names of males were registered). This census determined the eligibility of a citizen, depending upon the value of his property, to hold various elective offices of the Roman state. The censors also controlled public morality and had the right to take action against any citizen who violated norms of public morality. The censors had a few other functions like leasing public lands and giving state contracts. All these functions combined to make the censorship a very powerful office. In the early republic only patricians (mainly former consuls) could be elected as censors. Later, just as in the case of the consulship, plebeians also became eligible for this magistracy. It seems that in the last decades of the republic the importance of this position declined and the census of citizens itself became irregular. Shortly after the republic came to an end this office was revived for a brief period, but gradually it was abandoned.

In addition to the consuls and censors there were junior magistrates, as for instance aediles and quaestors. Four aediles were elected annually. They were in charge of public works and had to maintain roads, drains, and market places. The aediles had to make arrangements for public festivals

as well. Quaestors assisted the higher magistrates in the discharge of their duties. One of their main responsibilities was to look after the state treasury and maintain public accounts. The posts and duties of Roman officials multiplied as the empire expanded. Moreover, as we shall see, the struggle of the plebeians resulted in the creation of some very important magistracies which were meant specifically for this order.

While the magistrates had to serve in an honorary capacity—they did not receive any remuneration—the government had a host of salaried minor officials for routine day-to-day tasks. These officials were collectively called *apparitores*. They were paid their salaries by the state. Unlike the magistrates, the *apparitores* were not elected. Technically, their appointment was for one year (the entire machinery of the republic operated on an annual basis), but in actual practice the *apparitores* occupied their positions for a much longer duration since it was too cumbersome to make annual appointments. These public servants were recruited from among the relatively poorer sections of the population. The *apparitores* included scribes and lictors. Lictors were officials who escorted consuls (or the even more superior magistrates called dictators who were appointed in exceptional circumstances with extraordinary powers). The lictors carried with them bundles of wooden rods known as *fascies*, sometimes with and sometimes without an axe, which were the symbol of the authority vested in the consuls. Lictors carried twelve *fascies*, or bundles, for consuls, twenty-four *fascies* for dictators, and six *fascies* for the junior magistrates. This was a way of announcing the status of the magistrate to the people and indicating that his orders must be respected and complied with. In the twentieth century this symbol was revived by the Italian head of state Mussolini who distorted the concept of the *fascies* to legitimize his authority. Mussolini named his movement 'fascism', a term derived from the ancient Roman *fascies*.

Due to the growing power of the senate and the patrician magistrates after the establishment of the republic, the

plebeians began to assert themselves and demanded that they should also have a say in the political process. The patricians had worked out a system which totally excluded the plebeians from governance. But, given the role which the plebeians played in Roman military organization, they were able to successfully organize themselves to press for their demands. The political structure of the city of Rome included a tribal assembly which had been in existence since the time of the kings. The members of this assembly were all male adults of the communities which were initially settled at Rome. The Roman assembly, i. e. the assembly of citizens, was called *comitia curiata*. When the patricians assumed power and set up an oligarchical state the *comitia curiata* became defunct. It continued to exist formally but it had no real power. The power enjoyed by the kings had been transferred to the senate and the magistrates and not to the assembly.

The *comitia curiata* got its name from a kinship based social unit called *curia* into which the primitive inhabitants of Rome were divided. The *curiae* were extended clans which included plebeians and should not be confused with the patrician *gentes*. At the beginning of the republic there were thirty *curiae* which were grouped into three tribes. This grouping into three tribes corresponded to the three original tribes which lived in the area that became the city of Rome: Tities, Ramnes and Luceres. It should be clear that this is an oversimplified picture and we have to be very cautious while dealing with early Roman social organization considering the paucity of information about this remote period. Whatever might have been the pattern of social organization reflected in the *comitia curiata*, the classification of all citizens into thirty *curiae* which formed three tribes of ten *curiae* each had become fixed soon after the abolition of monarchy. As the population of Rome had increased, the *curiae* would have included some citizens who did not have kinship ties with the members. Each *curia* elected its own head called *curio* who was supposed to be over fifty years of age. The position of the *curio* was for life.

The chief *curio* was the *curio maximus*, who was always a patrician till 210 BC.

The patricians were able to influence the proceedings of the comitia curiata by choosing appropriate presiding officers. Voting in the assembly was not according to the principle of 'one member, one vote'. Each *curia* voted collectively so that only the opinion of the *curiae* (and not of individual members) was sought. Using their kinship ties patricians dominated the respective *curiae*. They would speak on behalf of the entire *curia*. The other citizens were reduced to mere onlookers. So irrelevant did the meetings of the comitia curiata become that eventually one official representative from each *curia* was sent to attend its sessions and vote on matters placed before it.

The plebeians found that the comitia curiata could hardly be expected to take care of their interests. As a result of growing pressure from the peasant soldiers of Rome, who invariably happened to be plebeians, the citizens were regrouped to form a new assembly. This assembly was called comitia centuriata. The comitia curiata was not abolished but the new assembly was created in addition to it. The comitia centuriata, like the comitia curiata, was an assembly of *all* Roman citizens. The difference between the two lay in the manner in which the citizens were grouped. For the purpose of the comitia centuriata the citizens were grouped into 'centuries'. A century was the smallest unit of the Roman army and was technically supposed to consist, as the name indicates, of one hundred men though in practice the number might have varied. In the initial stages the comitia centuriata would have resembled a military formation. In all likelihood its first meetings were held at the time of a military expedition, or when the city needed to be defended, and the opinion of all combatants including the vital peasant soldiers was sought. All male adults were assembled according to the unit, i. e. century, to which they belonged. The military origin of this assembly is further suggested by the fact that its usual meeting place even in the later republic was the Campus Martius, a large field on

the outskirts of Rome dedicated to Mars, the Roman god of war. This field was primarily used for military drills.

For most of the republican period the comitia centuriata was the main assembly of citizens. This was the assembly which elected the consuls and censors. Legislation had to be passed by the comitia centuriata. War and peace were the prerogative of this assembly. All major decisions of the state had to have the approval of the comitia centuriata. The comitia curiata now only looked after a few matters of a social and religious nature. Some issues pertaining to marriage, adoption, and inheritance were taken up by this assembly and wills were recorded there. Several officials who performed priestly functions were elected by the comitia curiata. But politically it was an insignificant body.

It is believed that the comitia centuriata was formed c. 450 BC. The working of the new assembly was such that ultimately it did not solve the problem of giving a share of political power to the plebeians. The comitia centuriata contained 193 centuries. Each century had one vote. As in the comitia curiata, the system of voting in the new assembly was not based on the principle of 'one member, one vote'. The collective vote of each century was taken. The arrangement of the centuries was such that the patricians controlled the majority of votes in the comitia centuriata.

The centuries were grouped into five classes. These classes were constituted on the basis of property qualifications. The 193 centuries of the comitia centuriata were *not* distributed equally among the five classes. The largest number of centuries were placed in the first three classes, which were classes of the aristocracy and the wealthy. In other words the first three classes possessed the majority of votes. Originally the centuries might have been units of one hundred but in the latter half of the fifth century BC a century did not actually contain one hundred citizens. In the comitia centuriata it was a notional unit. This should be obvious from the fact that the total of 193 centuries works out to 19,300 citizens, an unrealistic figure when we take into account the territorial expansion of Rome in Latium after 500

BC. Each century did not have the same number of citizens. The centuries of the first two classes had very few citizens in them. At the other extreme were the propertyless citizens. These citizens were labelled as *proletarius*, i. e. those whose only function was to bear children or *proles* (*proles* means offspring). The *proletarii* were placed in the lowest class. This class, though numerically large, was assigned just one century. With this kind of classification the participation of the poorer citizens in the assembly had no meaning whatsoever.

The patricians thus cleverly saw to it that despite being numerically very small they dominated the new assembly. They further ensured their hold over the *comitia centuriata* by laying down elaborate rules for its functioning. Meetings of the *comitia centuriata* were formally called by magistrates. The magistrates prepared the agenda for the assembly beforehand and citizens were only expected to vote without any discussion. Members could not initiate legislation in the assembly. Lists of candidates for magistracies were presented to the assembly for voting. These lists contained names of candidates that the patricians had chosen from among themselves. We cannot deny that the evolution of a political structure of this type represented a historical achievement, yet we must be aware of the limits of democracy in the Roman assembly.

Having failed to get a share of political power through the *comitia centuriata*, the plebeians organized themselves into a body of their own. This body came to be called the *concilium plebis*. The *concilium plebis* was an assembly of plebeians. It discussed various issues which concerned the plebeians. Soon the *concilium plebis* got institutionalized and evolved its own structure. It had regular procedures and elected its own officials. In 494 BC the plebeians forced the Roman state to formally accept two officers elected by the *concilium plebis*, known as *tribunes*, as spokesmen of the plebeians.

The most powerful weapon in the hands of the plebeians was the refusal to render military service. This refusal was

referred to as *secessio* by contemporaries. There are at least five recorded instances of *secessio*. The first occasion when the plebeians resorted to *secessio* was in 494 BC. They refused to serve as soldiers unless their demands were accepted. They wanted the Roman state to acknowledge the existence of the concilium plebis and recognize the tribunes. It was only after the Roman state had agreed to these demands that the *secessio* was called off. The responsibilities of the tribunes gradually multiplied leading to an increase in the number of tribunes. As the sphere of their activities expanded they acquired greater authority. By 448 BC the number of tribunes had risen to ten. The tribunes were elected annually by the concilium plebis. For the better off plebeians this became a much sought after office. Being elected a tribune gave to a plebeian some access to political power, something which was otherwise not possible at the beginning of the republic.

Following the victory of 494 BC there were four other important landmarks in the struggle of the plebeians during the early republic. One of the major demands of the plebeians was that there should be a written code of law so that there was no arbitrary exercise of judicial authority. The patricians had consistently abused their judicial powers by enforcing laws according to their own will. There were no written laws. The plebeians threatened the senate with another *secessio* if it did not initiate steps to create a proper legal framework for the Roman state. The senate set up a ten-member commission (the members of this commission therefore being called 'decemvirs') presided over by Appius Claudius. The decemvirs prepared a set of laws for the Romans. This set of laws is known as the Code of the Twelve Tables. It was introduced in 450 BC, around the same time as the establishment of the comitia centuriata. The Twelve Tables were the foundation on which the vast edifice of Roman law was built. Unfortunately, the full text of the Twelve Tables has not been preserved. Roman law, which became the basis of the entire legal system of western Europe, is one of the lasting contributions of Rome to human

civilization. Even today a large number of Roman legal terms are in use throughout the world.

We have already referred to the second landmark in the conflict of the orders. In 367 BC the patricians conceded one of the consulships to the plebeians. The actual election of a plebeian to the post of consul came much later. Since the consuls were elected by the *comitia centuriata* and the names of candidates were proposed by the senators it was not easy for a plebeian to be elected to the highest magistracy of the Roman state. It was only in the last hundred years of the republic that plebeians began to regularly hold consulships. The tenure of a consul was one year, but the consulship carried with it an additional advantage which was of a permanent nature. Consuls were eligible for becoming members of the senate. Hence, even though plebeians could not become senators in the normal course right till the end of the republic, election to the consulship provided them with an opportunity to enter the senate. Membership of the senate, it may be recalled, was for life. A few plebeians climbed to the rank of senator via the consulship. By utilizing this route a handful of senatorial plebeian families rose to prominence in the late republic (e.g. Gracchus brothers, Mark Antony).

Then in 326 BC another crucial reform took place. Roman law had a very harsh provision which applied to the strict enforcement of formal contracts or *nexum*. If a Roman entered into a formal agreement or *nexum* while contracting a loan in which the debtor's person was pledged as security, failure to honour the agreement automatically meant debt bondage. Debts incurred due to frequent participation in wars, as well as to meet diverse economic needs, had made indebtedness a chronic peasant problem. When the peasants and other poor people were unable to repay their loans they were enslaved. *Nexum* thus became a device for the big landowners to convert free peasants into unfree labour. Growing deprivation by the mid-republican period aggravated the problem. The plebeians had to agitate for the abolition of *nexum*. Finally, a law of 326 BC prohibited the

enslavement of a Roman citizen for non-repayment of debts. This law stabilized the position of the Roman peasantry for some time.

The fourth, and perhaps politically the most important, landmark in the prolonged contest between patricians and plebeians during the early republic was a legislation of 287 BC which gave the plebeian tribunes full-fledged magisterial powers. There seems to have been a serious crisis at this stage which culminated in another *secessio* by the plebeians. The political crisis within the republic coincided with the plan to bring the Greek states of southern Italy under Roman control. The situation was so serious that a dictator—who was an elected magistrate with absolute powers appointed at times of crisis for a short duration (usually six months)—was chosen to find some solution to the conflict of the orders. Quintius Hortensius was elected dictator with the specific objective of resolving the crisis. Quintius Hortensius enacted a law which made the decisions of the concilium plebis binding on the Roman state. The tribunes were authorized to enforce the decisions of the concilium plebis with appropriate punishments for violation. The reform of Hortensius, known as *Lex Hortensia* (Roman laws were named after the magistrates who initiated them), were of immense historical significance. The concilium plebis was now at par with other Roman assemblies. Its decisions had full legal authority. The tribuneship became a powerful magistracy. *Lex Hortensia* brought to an end one phase of the class struggle in the Roman republic. After 287 BC the struggle continued but the nature of the conflict underwent changes.

The developments of 287 BC probably necessitated a reorganization of the Roman assembly. A new assembly was constituted around this time, though the actual date is not known. This assembly was the comitia tributa. The comitia tributa was an assembly of all Roman citizens in which the citizens were grouped according to tribes (*tribus*). The term *tribus* is somewhat misleading because these were not kinship groups. For the purpose of the comitia tributa the

citizens were classified on the basis of their residence. The tribes of the *comitia tributa* were essentially residential tribes. The concept of these residential tribes had evolved over a long period of time. The practice of grouping Roman citizens according to residential tribes had a long history, but it was only in the third century BC that this grouping by tribes became relevant for voting in the assembly. As we have seen, in the other assemblies the citizens were grouped either on the basis of centuries or on the basis of *curiae* and kinship tribes. The unit of the *comitia tributa* was the residential tribe.

We cannot rule out the possibility of there having been originally a connection between the kinship tribes and residential tribes. In the remote past all those who belonged to the first ethnic tribes which dwelt in and around Rome were regarded as citizens. There were three such tribes, namely, *Tities*, *Ramnes* and *Luceres*. The three tribes of the *comitia curiata* corresponded to the three tribes which initially settled Rome. As the city increased in size these three tribes were reorganized, though the structure of the *comitia curiata* itself remained unchanged. The city was divided into four quarters with one tribe in each quarter. These tribes were residential tribes although the dominant kinship groups of the respective quarters must have been the nucleus of the residential tribes. Subsequently sixteen rural residential tribes were added to the four urban tribes and the number of tribes rose to twenty.

In the early republic the residential tribes were just a convenient method for compiling lists of citizens in accordance with their place of residence. This categorization was useful for census and for taxation. As Rome expanded into central Italy and selectively extended citizenship rights to other communities it became necessary to form more residential tribes to accommodate new citizens. The number of tribes gradually increased by stages from twenty to thirty-five. We learn that there were thirty-five tribes in 241 BC and that after that date no new tribes were created. Fresh citizens were accommodated in the existing tribes, sometimes quite

arbitrarily, so that ultimately the tribe in which a new citizen was placed did not always correspond to his place of residence.

It would appear that within the concilium plebis the plebeians were grouped according to the tribes to which they belonged. The concilium plebis is sometimes referred to as concilium plebis tributa. Ever since it came into existence the concilium plebis had evolved its own procedure. We should not forget that the concilium plebis had a formal position. It elected tribunes who possessed some authority even prior to 287 BC. The concilium plebis voted on proposals concerning the plebeians. Members of the plebeian assembly did not vote individually. The plebeians used the principle of voting prevalent in other Roman assemblies and voted collectively in groups. The most obvious and suitable units into which the plebeian citizens could have been divided were the residential tribes.

In a sense the comitia tributa was an extension of the concilium plebis. All that had to be done was to include the patricians. When a Roman assembly comprising both plebeians and patricians met and the citizens were grouped according to residential tribes it became the comitia tributa or the assembly of Roman tribes. This form of convening meetings of all Roman citizens gained more and more popularity after *Lex Hortensia* had made the decisions of the concilium plebis mandatory for the Roman state. The comitia tributa was a more egalitarian body as compared to the comitia curiata and the comitia centuriata. Birth and wealth did not determine the grouping of citizens. In the later republic the most important issues which required the opinion of the citizens were submitted to the comitia tributa for approval. The comitia tributa elected some magistrates like aediles and quaestors. It also had the power to conduct minor trials. With the passage of time the aristocracy began to dominate the comitia tributa too by managing its procedures.

It will be clear from the above account that the senate never completely surrendered its privileges. It made some

concessions by allowing the assemblies of Roman citizens (comitia curiata, comitia centuriata and comitia tributa), the concilium plebis, and the tribunes to have some say in the affairs of the Roman state. As new institutions were created the older ones were not formally abandoned. The senate coexisted with the concilium plebis; the comitia curiata and comitia centuriata coexisted with the comitia tributa; and the consuls coexisted with the tribunes. The functions of some of the older bodies were curtailed or modified. Yet there were other features which remained constant. The comitia curiata retained its archaic oligarchical structure, the comitia centuriata continued to elect the consuls, the senate remained theoretically closed to plebeians, and the consulship was still the most powerful magistracy at the end of the republic. The overall picture which emerges from this is that by the mid-republic there were multiple centres of power and this gave rise to much instability. Political instability at home went hand in hand with large-scale territorial expansion from 280 BC onwards.

III

Between 280 and 146 BC Rome was constantly at war. The Punic and Macedonian wars laid the foundations of Rome's Mediterranean empire. *Lex Hortensia* had temporarily reduced social and political tensions at home. This allowed the Roman state to mobilize resources for fighting its wars. The empire brought some relief to the plebeians. The dissatisfaction among them could therefore be kept in check for the time being. For instance after 167 BC Roman citizens residing in Italy did not have to pay any direct tax. All Roman citizens had to pay a direct tax called *tributum*. The *tributum* was abolished within Italy in 167 BC. The newly conquered territories were also a source of agricultural land for the Romans. A proportion of this land was given to poor farmers many of whom settled down in the provinces. At the same time continuous wars were a big burden on the peasant soldiers. In the long run we find that the wars

impoverished the peasantry while they enriched the aristocracy.

It is hardly surprising that after 146 BC the contradictions between the aristocracy and the peasantry sharpened, leading to a violent and bitter struggle. For over a century the Roman republic was in a perpetual state of unrest which at times assumed the shape of civil war. We must not think of the plebeians as a homogeneous class. At the beginning of the republic most of the plebeians had been peasants. By the late republic the plebeians had become socially differentiated. At one end there was a tiny elite among the plebeians which had used the concessions made to the plebeians, to accumulate wealth and become politically powerful. This phenomenon had produced a handful of plebeian senatorial families which enjoyed almost the same status as the patrician aristocracy. The plebeian elite had access to the senate, to all magistracies—including the consulship—and had the added advantage of being able to manipulate the concilium plebis to suit its interests. Plebeian senators owned large amounts of land. They commanded armies and held high positions. The tribunes were frequently elected from among this group. This small section of the plebeians had fully become a part of the ruling oligarchy of Rome by the late republic. The plebeian elite had little in common with the rest of the plebeians and were no longer interested in struggling for the rights of the peasantry.

At the bottom were the propertyless citizens. In the early republic most of the plebeians had owned some land, but by the third century BC many of them had lost their holdings. In the comitia centuriata the propertyless citizens were placed in the century of the *proletarii*. As the peasantry got impoverished the class of landless plebeians increased steadily, especially towards the end of the republic. In between the plebeian elite and the landless class stood the peasantry. The Roman small peasants were termed *assidui*. In the comitia centuriata the small peasants were classified as *assidui* on the basis of the value of their holdings. The *assidui* were the backbone of the Roman infantry. We may

regard them as the Roman equivalent of the Athenian *zeugitai*. This class had been finding it difficult to retain its land.

The abolition of debt bondage in 326 BC placed restrictions on the enslavement of peasants for non-repayment of debts. But the peasants were forced to hand over their land to their creditors when they were unable to pay back their loans. In this way the *assidui* lost more and more land to the big landowners, a trend which became pronounced during the Punic and Macedonian wars. For the peasants these were years of great adversity. The wars were rapidly reducing the *assidui* to the status of the *proletarii*.

After 146 BC the struggle of the peasants centred around the question of land reforms. The question of land reform had assumed urgency not only due to the desperate situation of the *assidui* but also because without land the peasants could not render military service. The *assidui* were demanding redistribution of land. A section of the ruling class also felt that some land reforms would have to be undertaken in order to stabilize the position of the peasantry. However the more conservative sections of the oligarchy were opposed to any kind of land reform, provoking a bloody conflict on this issue.

Two brothers (Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus), belonging to a plebeian oligarchical family which bore the name Gracchus, led the movement for land reforms. Tiberius Gracchus was elected tribune in 133 BC and initiated a programme for giving land to the peasants. The land which he proposed to distribute among the poor was actually public agricultural property which had been illegally taken over by the aristocracy. This category of land was known as *ager publicus*. The origins of *ager publicus* go back to the beginning of Roman expansion. When Rome subjugated a state after a military campaign, it tended to confiscate some of the agricultural land situated in the territory of that state. This was a sort of penalty imposed on the conquered state for resisting the Roman army. Upto one-third of the cultivable land might be confiscated. The confiscated land

was called *ager publicus* and was the collective property of all Roman citizens. The *ager publicus* was managed by the state.

A part of the *ager publicus* was distributed among poor peasants (this was necessary to sustain the army) while the rest was leased out by the state, mainly to big landowners and the aristocracy. The leasing was supervised by the censors. The best lands were cornered by the aristocracy. The issue of aristocratic control over the *ager publicus* had been raised from time to time. In 367 BC a law was enacted which placed an upper limit on the area of the *ager publicus* which an individual could take on lease. The size of the holding could not be more than 500 jugera (jugerum was a Roman unit for measuring area, roughly equal to two-thirds of an acre). This law was generally violated by the aristocracy and they occupied large tracts of the *ager publicus* for long durations. What is more, they regularly defaulted on the payment of dues for the leases. The *ager publicus* had thus been converted into private estates by the aristocracy.

When Tiberius Gracchus assumed office in 133 BC he set up a commission to take back all the *ager publicus* which was under illegal occupation. The resumed land was then to be distributed among small peasants. The peasants were to be given occupancy rights and had to pay dues to the state for this land. The aristocracy strongly resisted this reform and unleashed violence on a massive scale in the city of Rome. Tiberius Gracchus was prevented from seeking election to the tribuneship for another term. When he persisted he was killed along with three hundred of his supporters. Shortly afterwards Tiberius's younger brother Gaius Gracchus became tribune in 123 BC. Gaius carried forward the reforms by implementing the agrarian laws of Tiberius. To improve the lot of the dispossessed citizens Gaius started sale of cheap grain subsidized by the state. Later on this developed into a system of free grain distribution to the poorest sections of the Romans. Gaius also settled a large section of poor citizens in the newly conquered territories of Carthage.

Gaius was murdered in 121 BC and his followers were brutally massacred. In 119 BC the commission for redistributing the *ager publicus* was disbanded. This ended the last major attempt to carry out land reforms in Rome. The struggle for improving the conditions of the *assidui* was unsuccessful. By the end of the republic the small peasantry became an insignificant class. On the other hand the ranks of the *proletarii* swelled. We can say that in the last hundred years of the republic the overwhelming majority of the plebeians had become landless citizens. This process had been going on for a long time. P.A. Brunt (*Social Conflicts in the Roman Republic*) has argued that by the time the Second Punic War began the bulk of the citizens were already landless. He points out that the size of peasant holdings had decreased considerably by the second century BC. The *assidui* found it difficult to support themselves. When this is viewed in the context of the military campaigns in which they had to participate, which led to the physical elimination of large numbers of *assidui* soldiers, we can easily understand how a class which formed the majority of the citizens when the republic was established virtually disappeared in the final years of the republic.

In the second century BC the qualification for the *assidui* was property with a value of at least 400 denarii (the silver denarius was the standard Roman currency in the republican period). Brunt has calculated that in this period 400 denarii would have been the value of about one acre of cultivable land. The yield from one acre of land was much less than the bare minimum that was necessary for survival. Brunt compares this situation with peasant holdings in the early republic when the average size of the holdings was approximately 5 acres. Moreover, the small peasants had been pushed to marginal and less fertile areas by the big landowners. Under these circumstances it was impossible for the peasants to make a living out of their land. Peasant holdings in Italy eventually passed into the hands of the aristocracy. This trend was facilitated by the indebtedness of the *assidui* who had to often raise loans for performing

their military duties. The long absence of able-bodied adult workers from their fields during campaigns and their death in wars completed the ruin of the Roman peasantry.

The failure to carry out land reforms and the dwindling size of the *assidui* class necessitated an immediate solution to the problem of recruiting soldiers. After all, landless citizens could not be expected to render military service out of their own resources. Earlier, a partial solution to this problem had been found by raising auxiliary contingents from subjugated territories. A portion of the cavalry was also maintained at state expense. In 100 BC Marius, who held the post of consul for several terms and was a leading political and military figure, reformed the Roman army by inducting paid troops. Henceforth Roman troops received a salary from the state. Landless citizens could now serve as soldiers.

The creation of a semi-professional army which was commanded by military leaders drawn from the oligarchy gave a new dimension to the political conflicts in Rome. Previously the *assidui* soldiers would return home after a campaign and go back to their fields. Now the soldiers were permanently engaged in campaigns and were stationed for long periods outside Italy in distant parts of the empire. The army units developed an identity of their own. They were fiercely loyal to their commanders to whose planning and strategy they attributed their achievements. This was particularly the case with the more successful commanders. Victory in war gave a chance to the soldiers to loot and plunder. With large well-trained armies under them the military leaders of the oligarchy could violently assert themselves for controlling the policies of the Roman state. There were several such commanders in the period between 100 BC and 27 BC: Marius himself, Sulla, Crassus, Pompey, Julius Caesar, Mark Antony and Augustus. The army was increasingly deployed to suppress discontent and to promote the interests of the aristocracy. It was also used in personal factional conflicts by the oligarchy. The army itself became a factor in the politics of Rome.

The elimination of the *assidui* as a class transformed the character of the Roman republic. Roman citizens in central Italy were now mainly propertyless plebeians. Having no means of subsistence at their disposal they congregated in the city of Rome where cheap rations were available. Considering that most of the *proletarii* could not afford even subsidized grain the Roman state began to distribute free grain to the most destitute citizens. Brunt in his important work entitled *Italian Manpower* has estimated that by c. 50 BC about 320,000 citizens were receiving free grain.

The largest chunk of participants in Roman assemblies now was of unemployed poverty-stricken members who subsisted on free grain distribution. But their physical presence in the city of Rome could not be ignored. As citizens they had some role to play in the affairs of the state. Mobs of discontented *proletarii* were a destabilizing factor. Free grain distribution took care of their very basic need for food. Otherwise, they were a potential source of unrest. Plebeian mobs at times turned violent and disrupted meetings of the assembly. They were manipulated by the individual politicians to capture political power. In fact the plebeian mobs had been used by the aristocracy in the violence against the Gracchus brothers. It was with the help of these landless citizens that the programme for land reform was scuttled. Commenting on this Perry Anderson says (*Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*): 'While the [Roman] countryside became chequered with large noble domains, the city conversely became populated with a proletarianized mass, deprived of land or any other property. Once fully urbanized, this large and desperate underclass lost any will to return to a small-holder condition, and could often be manipulated by aristocratic cliques against projects for agrarian reform backed by the *assidui* farmers. Its strategic position in the capital of an expanding empire ultimately obliged the Roman ruling class to pacify its immediate material interests with public grain distributions. *These were, in effect, a cheap substitute for the land distribution which never occurred*' (emphasis added).

IV

For seventy years from 100 BC onwards Rome witnessed a series of violent upheavals. In 91 BC there was a widespread revolt in Italy against Roman rule. A regular war broke out between Rome and several Italian communities which had been subjugated by the Romans. The Marsi and Samnites were the most formidable opponents of the Romans in this war. This war is called the Social War (91-89 BC). The word 'social' here refers to the *socii Italici* or Italian allies (*socius* means ally, companion). In other words this was a war with Rome's Italian allies. When Rome established its domination over Italy it either went in for direct annexation of territories or else imposed unequal alliances on the Italian states. Annexed territories were mainly located in central Italy and these were the earliest conquests of Rome. These states or tribal communities ceased to be independent. They were directly administered by Rome. The communities inhabiting these territories were integrated with the Romans. The allied states, i. e. *socii Italici*, were however allowed to retain their own governments which were more or less autonomous in matters of internal administration. The foreign affairs of the allies were subject to Roman control. Relations with allies were governed by formal treaties which acknowledged Roman supremacy. The allies had to render military assistance to Rome. The nature of this assistance was specified in the agreements.

When the Social War began only one-seventh of Italy was directly governed by Rome. This implies that most of Italy was allied territory. The emergence of a mighty Roman empire had a profound impact upon Roman relations with the Italian allies. Roman interference in the internal affairs of these states had increased over the years since they were too weak to offer effective resistance. The allies lost much of their autonomy. What these states resented even more was the growing military and financial burden placed on them by Rome. The provisions of the treaties with allies were ignored by the Romans. The *socii* felt that their loss of autonomy could be remedied if they also had a right to

participate in the decision-making process of the Roman state. This was not possible since the allies were not Roman citizens. The main demand of the allies during the Social War was that Roman citizenship rights should be extended to the *socii Halici*, although there were some Italian communities like the Samnites who fought the war with the objective of regaining their independence.

The Roman conception of citizenship should not be thought of as something fixed or static. Roman citizenship had evolved over many centuries and was still evolving towards the end of the republic. As in the case of any ancient society having some sort of democratic structure, male adults belonging to the original community or communities settled in a given territory for a long time constituted the original citizen body. These primitive communities were socially organized as tribes or clans and the citizens invariably had kinship and marriage ties with other members of the citizen body. Similarly in Rome the initial citizens belonged to the tribes settled within the city. The three tribes of the *comitia curiata* reflected the early social and political organization of the Romans. Of course class differentiation and the rise of a well-organized state had modified this organization by introducing clearcut class distinctions within the tribes and *curiae*. The most obvious division was between the patricians and plebeians. Despite these class distinctions citizenship rights at the beginning of the republic extended to all male adults of the communities settled in Rome.

This narrow conception of citizenship suited relatively small territorial units. It was not workable for larger states. We saw in the previous chapter that when Athens expanded its territory in Attica it incorporated the neighbouring communities of Eleusis and Marathon with the citizen body of Athens. To some extent this was also true of Thebes in Boeotia. Sparta was an exception among the larger Greek states in resorting to the wholesale enslavement of Laconians and Messenians. The citizens of Sparta remained a small closed group, but they had to pay a heavy price in terms of

devoting so much time to military training in order to keep the Laconians and Messenians in a state of permanent slavery.

The Romans preferred to extend citizenship to the communities which it subdued during its expansion in Latium. To some extent this was unavoidable because Rome was still a very weak state in fifth century BC. It was impossible for it to reduce neighbouring communities to helotry as the Spartans had done. Rather, Rome desperately needed the cooperation of Latin communities which lived in the neighbourhood of the city to defend itself against raids by Etruscans, Oscans, Umbrians and Volscians. To start with it formed a confederation with the Latin people and later when it had become sufficiently strong it ended the independence of the Latins. In return the Latins were given citizenship rights. This made them a formal part of the Roman state. At the same time they were obliged to be soldiers in the Roman army. This was a long drawn-out process and there were some Latin people who submitted to Rome voluntarily while others were subjugated after being defeated in battle. The extension of citizenship rights to the Latin speaking people established a special relationship between the Romans and other Latins.

The extension of citizenship rights to the Latins did not necessarily mean that all of them got the right to vote in the assembly. As the Roman concept of citizenship evolved, two different types of citizenship came into existence. Citizens either enjoyed full citizenship rights or were inferior citizens (or half citizens). Full Roman citizenship implied two types of rights: political rights (*jura publica*) and civil rights (*jura privata*). The political rights of citizenship gave a citizen the right to participate and vote in the assembly. These rights entitled him to be elected to various public offices, subject to certain qualifications. Civil rights pertained to marriage, inheritance, ownership of property, and enforcement of contractual obligations. Roman law only recognized the validity of marriages between citizens (i.e. a person had to belong to a family of a citizen in order to marry someone

from another citizen's family). This did not mean that marriage between citizens and non-citizens was prohibited. It meant that marriages among citizens and non-citizens, unless they had been explicitly sanctioned by the state, would not give the offspring born of such marriages the rights of citizenship and inheritance. Only citizens possessed the right to a Roman marriage, called *conubium*. Marriages with *conubium* allowed the children to have rights of citizenship and to inherit property.

The question of inheritance was important because it was linked to ownership. The civil rights of citizens allowed them to have full ownership rights which included the right to sell and inherit property. It may be mentioned here that Roman law clearly distinguished between possession (*possessio*) and ownership (*dominium*) of property. Only citizens had full ownership rights. Further, civil rights included *commercium* or the right to enter into contracts with other citizens and to have such contracts enforced in a court of law. In the absence of *commercium* a contract had no legal validity before a Roman court. Thus, *jura privata* automatically conferred *conubium*, *commercium* and *dominium* on a citizen.

Citizens with full citizenship rights enjoyed both political rights and civil rights. Inferior citizens, whom we may call half citizens, only had civil rights. They could not vote or get elected to Roman magistracies. Initially when citizenship rights were given to the Latins only civil rights were intended. This enabled intermarriage between Romans and other Latin communities and allowed Latins to hold property in full ownership. The unique association between the Romans and other Latins gave rise to a special prerogative called *jus Latii* (Latin right) which indicated the right of the Latins to enjoy Roman *jura privata*. Subsequently some sections of Latin communities outside Rome were given political rights as well making them full citizens. To begin with this must have applied to ruling classes of the Latin communities. This arrangement was extended to some Italian states when Rome brought most of central Italy under

its control. If a state was permitted to have an autonomous local government under the overall supervision of Rome it was referred to as a *municipium*. The *municipium* usually had an urban centre and later the term acquired the meaning of 'free city'. The foreign policy of a *municipium* was regulated by Rome and it had to provide military assistance as and when called upon to do so. Inferior citizenship rights were extended to the *municipium*, though a small section might be made full citizens. The Roman oligarchy tended to forge alliances with the aristocratic sections of conquered territories in central Italy by giving them a place in the structure of the Roman state. This tendency can be seen in other parts of Italy also. It should be emphasized that for an entire state or community to gain full citizenship it had to give up its autonomy and completely merge with the Roman state.

Depending upon the relations with a particular community some were given full citizenship rights while others were given inferior citizenship rights. Generally speaking full citizens were mostly concentrated in central Italy particularly in areas inhabited by Latins. It was rarely that Rome gave full citizenship rights outside this core area. Beyond Italy there was no question of granting any kind of citizenship. In terms of citizenship rights *jus Latii* and *municipium* denoted basically the same thing, i.e. inferior citizenship rights. The main point of difference between them and the *socii Italici* was that ordinarily the inhabitants of allied territories did not have Roman civil rights. Technically the *socii Italici* stood outside the Roman state, while the Latins and the *munidpia* were an integral part of the Roman state.

While discussing Roman citizenship we must refer to another feature of Roman expansion in Italy. When Rome had annexed a territory it sometimes sent out a group of Roman citizens to settle in that territory. This body of citizens established a Roman colony (*colonia*) in the conquered area. The colonies acted as garrisons to ensure Roman control. The Roman citizens in these colonies retained «11 their citizenship rights while local inhabitants

were made inferior citizens. We are told about a colony of 300 Roman citizens being first set up at Ostia, the main port of the city of Rome. The colony of Ostia had well-defined garrison duties. Many more colonies were set up along the sea to protect the coastline. When Rome embarked upon expansion outside Latium after 338 BC, colonies were established on a large scale in central Italy. This was a strategy to consolidate Roman rule in newly annexed territories. In addition to Roman colonies there were now several Latin colonies. These were somewhat different. The Latin colonies were relatively bigger. They were made up of a mixture of full and half citizens from Latin areas together with some Romans. The Latin colonies were organized into autonomous self-governed units. Apart from their strategic role the Latin and Roman colonies served to latinize the areas in which they were located. They helped to spread Roman culture and ideas in Italy. In the late republic colonies tended to be much larger in size, with up to 5000 settlers. It was no longer necessary to maintain colonies to control Italian territories. Colonies were now one way of providing land to impoverished peasants. The later colonies were not confined to central Italy but were to be found in other parts of Italy too. Gaius Gracchus created the first overseas colony in Carthage. By the end of the republic it had become common to set up colonies outside Italy, especially in western Europe (Spain, Gaul etc.). After 100 BC retired professional soldiers (veterans) were given land and settled in colonies. The colonies outside Italy were in the provinces, i. e. in territories directly administered by Rome. These colonies had their own local governments and the citizens had full citizenship rights. Their political rights were however a mere formality since they could not regularly travel to Rome to participate in the assembly. Nevertheless they were the nucleus of Roman citizens in the provinces and in later years inhabitants from these colonies rose to high positions in the Roman state.

It can be seen that Roman citizenship was extended on a very selective basis and that the grant of citizenship rights

always had a political-military objective. As long as the Italian allies were left free to manage their internal affairs and the provisions of the treaties, particularly provisions regarding military assistance, were respected by Rome the *socii* did not mind being denied citizenship rights. The mounting military burden combined with loss of autonomy made them demand citizenship rights. When the senate rejected the demand the allies joined hands to fight against Rome. This was the background to the Social War.

The war ended with a compromise. In 90 BC Rome granted full citizenship to all allied territories in Italy south of the river Po. It has been commented that in terms of political rights the extension of citizenship to all free inhabitants of Italy (barring the Cisalpine region) had very little meaning except for the elites who got limited access to political power. The majority of citizens could not be physically present in Rome to participate in sessions of the assembly and were therefore unable to exercise their political rights. This is an indication of the decline of the *comitia tributa* and *concilium plebis*. The proceedings of these assemblies were totally dominated by the urban proletarian mobs residing in the city of Rome who were used by the oligarchy to disrupt the functioning of the government on more than one occasion.

By 90 BC the constitutional machinery of the Roman republic was on the verge of collapse. The multiplicity of centres of power added to the confusion. The army had emerged as a new political factor. It had altered the balance of forces in Rome and began to play a decisive role in determining the outcome conflicts. The conflicts were increasingly marked by bloodshed on a massive scale. The Social War had coincided with a major military campaign in West Asia. In continuation of its programme to make the territories of the Hellenistic kingdoms a part of the empire, Rome had been trying to increase its sphere of influence in West Asia. Macedonia had been annexed, the Greek states had been forced to accept Roman supremacy, the Seleucids of Syria had been defeated in war, and Egypt was made a

protectorate. Western Anatolia had recently been organized as the province of Asia. But the Romans faced a stiff challenge from the ruler of the state of Pontus in Anatolia. Pontus was situated in northern Anatolia, south of the Black Sea. Initially the relations between Rome and Pontus had been quite cordial. Pontus had supported Rome in the Macedonian wars and the Third Punic War. But relations between the two states deteriorated when king Mithridates VI of Pontus began expanding into western Anatolia and Greece.

Roman expansion in Anatolia was halted by Mithridates VI. Mithridates VI of Pontus should not be mixed-up with Parthian kings of the same name (this name was linked to the worship of Mithra which was prevalent in West Asia, and the title Mithridates was borne by several rulers in this region). The Parthians ruled over Iran and parts of Mesopotamia. Mithridates I had created a large Parthian empire and his successor Mithridates II was a contemporary of Mithridates VI of Pontus. The latter phase of the clash with Mithridates VI coincided with Roman wars against the Parthian king Mithridates II and his successors, which can be somewhat confusing.

Rome had to wage three wars against Mithridates VI (Mithridatic wars) before they could finally defeat him in 63 BC. After the Social War Roman armies were engaged in the Mithridatic wars. Given the scale of operations in West Asia, Rome had to send a very large force to the east. The command of this vast army became matter of dispute among the political and military leaders of Rome. Marius, who had been consul for several terms and was an able military leader, was given charge of the campaign against Mithridates. Marius was opposed by Sulla who at that time headed the most conservative and anti-poor faction of the patrician aristocracy. This was the faction which had blocked the grant of citizenship to the *socii* which had precipitated the Social War. Sulla was stationed in the east at the end of the Social War. He was asked to hand over command of the eastern armies to Marius, but refused. Instead he

marched to Rome with the army and tried to forcibly seize power.

A Civil War (88-82 BC) broke out between Sulla and Marius. Sulla soon got the upper hand in this Civil War. His task was made easier by the death of Marius in 86 BC. Sulla then resumed the war against Pontus and succeeded in expelling Mithridates VI from the Greek states which he (Mithridates) had occupied. His success added to his prestige and increased his hold over the army. He used this power to become absolute ruler of Rome. Sulla returned to Rome in 82 BC and with the help of the army put an end to the Civil War. He brutally suppressed his opponents. In 81 BC he was appointed dictator. Sulla defied the rule according to which six months was the maximum period for which a Roman dictator could assume office. He extended his dictatorship indefinitely. Sulla's personal authority was supreme with all political and military power concentrated in his hands.

Sulla's dictatorship lasted from 81 to 79 BC. In 79 BC he retired for personal reasons and died the next year. His dictatorship marked a turning point in the history of the republic. From now on the powerful military commanders, who have been called 'warlords' by D. Dudley (*Roman Society*), decided the fate of the Roman republic. The violent conflicts of these warlords speeded up the collapse of the republic. Sulla's dictatorship witnessed the strengthening of the patrician aristocracy. Sulla dealt with the plebeian senatorial leaders in a very cruel manner. He let loose a reign of terror against all those who wanted to make the structure of the republic more democratic and broadbased. The democratic gains of the previous few decades were done away with. Powers of the tribunes were reduced and the assemblies of citizens were ignored. Sulla wanted to restore the prestige of the senate. The seats in the senate were doubled from 300 to 600. This weakened the position of the plebeian senators and at the same time gave the aristocracy (which now included the elite among the Italian allies who had received citizenship rights) an overwhelming presence

in the state. The census, which had been the only way of determining a citizen's place in the republican institutions, was abandoned and the position of the censor declined. Sulla also abolished free grain rations causing great hardship to the destitute citizens.

The measures of Sulla could not have been a long term solution to the political crisis of the republic. Most of his regulations were reversed after his death. The military situation had become critical in the 80s and 70s. The Mithridatic wars were still going on in east and now Rome had to defend its empire in the west. Some of the supporters of Marius had launched a movement against Sulla's dictatorship. The province of Spain became the focal point of the rebellion. The movement developed into a guerrilla war under the leadership of Quintius Sertorius and between 80 and 72 BC Spain almost seceded from Rome. Sertorius is regarded as the most brilliant guerriUa leader of the ancient Greco-Roman world. Within Italy itself a major slave uprising broke out in 73 BC and went on till 71 BC. This uprising, which was led by a Thracian slave named Spartacus, was the biggest slave revolt in Roman history. The Spartacus revolt, as it is called, originated in Sicily and soon spread to southern Italy. The revolt was crushed after heavy fighting in 71 BC.

The campaigns against Mithridates VI, Sertorius, and Spartacus required military mobilization on an unprecedented scale. Without the support of the plebeian elite such mobilization was impossible. In the post-Sulla period the plebeian senatorial oligarchy reasserted itself making it all the more difficult to resolve the internal political conflicts of the republic. Moreover, the military campaigns of this period brought four warlords to the forefront of Roman politics. These four warlords were Lucullus, Crassus, Pompey and Julius Caesar. Their struggle for power dominated the closing years of the republic.

Of the four, Crassus and Pompey had started their political careers as supporters of Sulla, but they were later instrumental in revoking his measures. They were opposed

to letting the senate monopolize the Roman state. These warlords derived their strength from the armies which they commanded and the prestige which they gained due to their victories. Pompey defeated Sertorius, Crassus suppressed the Spartacus revolt and Lucullus was able to temporarily check Mithridates VI. In 70 BC Crassus and Pompey consolidated their political position by getting elected as consuls for that year. Julius Caesar was sent to Spain to restore order in the province after the defeat of Sertorius. Lucullus was still in Anatolia because even though Mithridates had been expelled from Pontus, he recovered most of his territory due to a mutiny in the Roman army.

In 67 BC Lucullus was recalled from the east and thereafter retired from public life. This left three warlords— Crassus, Pompey, and Julius Caesar. Pompey was sent out to the east to lead the Roman army against Mithridates. Pompey was given extensive powers under a law called *Lex Manilla* (66 BC). Under *Lex Manilia* Pompey enjoyed powers which were more wide-ranging than those of any other Roman military commander before him. His own command was combined with that which Lucullus had held. He was fully authorized to settle the east in whatever manner he considered appropriate. Pompey inflicted a decisive defeat on Mithridates in 63 BC. Pontus was divided among chiefs who pledged their loyalty to Rome. Having established Roman supremacy over Anatolia, Pompey annexed the Seleucid territories in Syria. As we have noted the Seleucid kingdom was confined to Syria after Antiochus III. The Romans had defeated Antiochus III but had allowed the Seleucid state to survive. Subsequently Parthian expansion in West Asia had deprived the Seleucids of most of their territories. The Seleucids were left with only Syria, where also their rule was quite weak. In 63 BC Pompey annexed Syria and made it a Roman province with headquarters at Antioch. Rome was now a leading power in West Asia.

When Pompey had concluded his assignment in the east he returned to Rome in 62 BC. The return of Pompey inaugurated a new era in Roman politics. Pompey was

certainly in a position to assume absolute authority like Sulla had done. He however preferred to disband his army. The convention which had traditionally been followed in Rome was that when a general entered the city after a campaign he did so as a private citizen and not as a military commander. Sulla had violated this convention but Pompey did not want to create a situation that might lead to more bloodshed. This gave the senate a chance to curtail the power of Pompey. Since the administrative arrangements made by Pompey in the east were subject to the approval of the senate, the senate tried to interfere in these arrangements which delayed their confirmation.

As the tension between Pompey and the senate grew, Pompey joined hands with the two other warlords to counter the senate. Julius Caesar had returned from Spain in 60 BC. Crassus, Pompey and Julius Caesar formed a coalition in 60 BC. This coalition is referred to as the First Triumvirate (triumvirate was a term for any official institution in which authority was equally divided among three persons). The historical significance of the Triumvirate can only be understood when we realize that the constitutional machinery of the republic had broken down by this time and there was no effective government at Rome. Pompey, Crassus and Julius Caesar tried out a new experiment by concentrating all power in their hands. The entire authority of the Roman state was vested in the Triumvirate. The other institutions of the republic were not abolished but they were made ineffective.

In 60 BC the three warlords had entered into a formal agreement to share power by forming a Triumvirate. In 56 BC they renewed this agreement. After 56 BC, however, the Triumvirate began facing problems. Crassus had been given command of the eastern army where he endeavoured to extend the Roman frontiers beyond Syria. This involved him in a full-fledged war with the Parthians who were now ruling over Iran and Mesopotamia. The Romans suffered one of their biggest military reverses when their army was totally routed by the Parthians in 53 BC at the battle of

Carrhae (Harran, in northern Mesopotamia). Crassus was killed in this battle. The death of Crassus upset the balance of power in the Triumvirate. For a few years after this event there was a tussle between Julius Caesar and Pompey.

Julius Caesar had received the command of Roman armies in Gaul (modern France and Belgium) in 58 BC. For nearly a decade Caesar was in Gaul. He conquered this large and fertile region for the Roman empire. Gaul was inhabited by Celtic tribes who had evolved their own distinctive culture in areas lying beyond the Alpine mountains. It may be recalled that some Celtic Gauls were also settled in the northern parts of Italy, between the Alps and the river Po, and this part of Italy came to be known as Cisalpine Gaul. The main zone of Celtic settlement lay beyond the Alps. The Celtic Gauls gave their name to this region and the Romans generally referred to present day France and Belgium as Gaul. The Gauls strongly resisted Roman domination. They organized themselves militarily to prevent Roman conquest of their territories. The most well-known leader of the Gauls was Vercingetorix of the Arverni tribe. It was only in 50 BC that Julius Caesar succeeded in subjugating the Gauls.

By the time Caesar had completed the conquest of Gaul the relations between him and Pompey had worsened. In order to prevent Pompey from becoming absolute ruler of Rome, Caesar decided to march into Italy with his army. In 49 BC he crossed the Rubicon river on his way to Rome. When the territories of Cisalpine Gaul were organized, the river Rubicon was made its southern boundary. Officially Julius Caesar's command was confined to the area north of the Rubicon. He was not authorized to cross the river into Italy proper with his army. He ignored this provision and led his army to Rome. There was a brief civil war between the two warlords. Pompey was defeated in 48 BC and fled to Egypt where he was murdered. Julius Caesar was now the supreme warlord of Rome. In 48 BC he became dictator with extensive powers. In 47 BC he was made dictator for ten years. This might have been a step in the direction of acquiring monarchical authority. Caesar's attempts to

become absolute ruler was challenged by some sections of the oligarchy. He was murdered in 44 BC. The leaders of the conspiracy to assassinate Caesar were Brutus and Cassius. They belonged to the faction of the oligarchy which wanted to prevent Julius Caesar from converting the republic into a monarchy. There can be doubt that Julius Caesar had been trying to alter the basic structure of the republic.

The supporters of Julius Caesar were still sufficiently strong to assert themselves after his assassination. They quickly organized themselves under the leadership of Mark Antony, Lepidus and Octavian Caesar. Mark Antony was a prominent political ally of Caesar. Lepidus had been 'master of the horse' under Caesar. 'Master of the horse' (*magister equitum*) was an office attached to the post of a dictator and normally it was held by a very loyal supporter. Lepidus had also been consul in 46 BC. Octavian was a grand-nephew of Caesar. His mother Atia was Julius Caesar's niece. He had been recognized as the adopted son of Julius.

Mark Antony, Lepidus, and Octavian Caesar formed a new triumvirate, known as the Second Triumvirate, in 43 BC. Within a year the Triumvirate had suppressed all opposition. Brutus and Cassius were defeated in battle (42 BC). Lepidus, who was the weakest among the three leaders, was then forced to retire from the Triumvirate. Subsequently differences arose between Mark Antony and Octavian over sharing political power. The struggle for power between the two coincided with further Roman campaigns in the east. Mark Antony sought the support of Cleopatra, who was at that time the Ptolemaic ruler of Egypt. The combined forces of Mark Antony and Cleopatra were defeated by Octavian at Actium on the western coast of mainland Greece in 31 BC. Mark Antony and Cleopatra were dead by 30 BC and Octavian became the supreme ruler of the whole Roman empire. In 27 BC Octavian assumed the title Augustus (exalted) and declared himself *princeps*, i. e. the first and foremost citizen. 27 BC formally marks the end of the republic and the beginning of the Roman principate.

Chapter Nine

ANCIENT ROME-

OCTAVIAN, who was called Augustus Caesar after 27 BC, transformed the entire character of the Roman state. The changes introduced by him were a continuation of the measures initiated by Sulla, the First Triumvirate, Julius Caesar, and the Second Triumvirate. The dictatorship of Sulla, the First and Second Triumvirates, and above all the dictatorship of Julius Caesar, had undermined the institutions of the Roman republic. Within half a century, i.e. between 81 and 31 BC, these institutions had more or less ceased to function and political power had got concentrated in the hands of the warlords. Julius Caesar, after having defeated his main rival Pompey, tried to become a permanent dictator. This experiment was cut short by the assassination of Julius Caesar. Had Caesar lived for some time it is likely that his dictatorship would have culminated in a monarchy. After he was killed, political power still remained in the hands of his supporters. With the backing of the troops which were loyal to Julius Caesar, three warlords—Mark Antony, Lepidus and Octavian—took over the Roman state and formed the Second Triumvirate. However Octavian was able to eliminate the other two members of the new Triumvirate (Lepidus was not physically eliminated but was forcibly retired), and by 31 BC he had emerged as the unchallenged leader of the Roman empire.

I

Augustus ruled over Rome as *princeps* for four decades till his death in AD 14. He completed the process begun by Julius Caesar and was successful in establishing a permanent dictatorship which developed into a monarchy. He was successful where Sulla and Julius Caesar had failed. Augustus was careful not to hurt the sentiments which the people had for Roman republican traditions. These traditions had a history of several centuries and could not be immediately abandoned. Augustus cleverly retained the *outward form* of the republic while altering the *actual content* of the Roman state. Most of the political institutions of the republic were retained and the designations of public officials remained the same as before. Augustus himself was not referred to as king (*rex*) and he had no royal title. *Princeps* merely meant first citizen. In fact it might not have been apparent to contemporaries that a monarchical form of government was coming into existence. It is only when we place the Augustan era in a historical context that we can understand the implications of his actions and see how he replaced the republic with a monarchy.

Initially under Augustus the Roman state had the appearance of a republic. But by the time he died the state had in effect become a monarchy. Except for the senate all other features of the republic had become worthless. The final transition from republic to monarchy was actually completed in a period spread over several generations. For a long time the successors of Augustus maintained the fiction that the republic had not come to an end. Theoretically at least the authority of the emperor was not derived from any divine right to rule but was based on the consent of the citizens. The ruler was the embodiment of the republic. In practice this meant that a ruler had to have the sanction of the senate and the army. Though there were no formal rules about this but recognition by both the senate and the army gave the stamp of legitimacy to an emperor and made his rule relatively stable. This arrangement had

its origins in the kind of state which Augustus created after defeating Mark Antony.

Given that the constitutional machinery of the republic had collapsed and in view of the multiplicity of centres of political power in Rome it was necessary that a compromise formula be worked out which would give an adequate share of power to various components of the state. The emperor, i.e. Augustus, the senatorial oligarchy (which included the plebeian elite), and the army were the three main components of the new political structure. Augustus was successful in ensuring a proper balance between these three centres of power, thereby putting an end to the long period of instability of the last few decades of the republic.

It must be emphasized that as a class the senatorial oligarchy—Augustus belonged to this class—was too powerful to be ignored, and although Augustus limited the authority of the senate he allowed it to remain an important part of the government. Since the army was the main source of Augustus's power, the military leadership also had a key role to play in the affairs of the state. Augustus made it clear that the military leadership was fully subservient to him and that he was the supreme commander of the Roman armies. The violent conflicts which had marked the two triumvirates had shown how dangerous it was to form coalitions of military commanders for neutralizing the senate. Augustus followed the example of Julius Caesar in exercising absolute personal power. Moreover, the defeat of Mark Antony had left no military commander in the Roman empire who could compete with Augustus.

The main objective of Augustus was to concentrate as much power as possible in his own hands. His government may be described as a permanent military dictatorship. The government of the republic had been based on a system of granting *imperium* to magistrates and military commanders. The *imperium* was the authority vested in an official for performing executive, judicial or military functions. *Imperium* was granted to high officials and it gave them unlimited authority within their defined spheres to carry out

their constitutional responsibilities. The *imperium* was given for specific tasks and the duration and area for which the *imperium* was valid was always clearly indicated. The *imperium* of a consul was for one year. It was through the *imperium* that the consuls got their powers. Governor* of provinces, called *proconsuls*, held the *imperium* for administering their respective provinces. Similarly the *imperium* of a military commander was for the period of a campaign. The *imperium* came to an end when the objective of the campaign had been attained. The *imperium* of military commanders defined their area of operation. During the First Triumvirate Julius Caesar had the *imperium* for Gaul. His *imperium* was valid only beyond the northern frontier of Italy. The river Rubicon marked the boundary of Julius Caesar's *imperium* and when he crossed the Rubicon in 49 BC he violated his *imperium*.

In the republic several officials held the *imperium* simultaneously at any given moment of time. The *imperium* of each official related to whatever duties he was expected to carry out in his capacity as magistrate or military commander. What Augustus did was to limit the *imperium* to just one person, i. e. himself. As holder of the *imperium* he was designated *imperator* or commander. The term *imperator* (from which the word emperor is derived) henceforth signified the one and only person who possessed *imperium*. The *imperium* of Augustus was for an indefinite period and was valid throughout the empire. He was the only military commander with *imperium*. Consuls continued to be elected but they were divested of their *imperium*. With the approval of the *concilium plebis* the powers of the tribunes were transferred to Augustus.

Augustus divided the provinces between himself and the senate. He asked the senate to give him exclusive command over the provinces of Gaul, Spain and Syria for ten years. The remaining provinces were directly governed by the senate. Augustus already ruled over Egypt. The province of Egypt eventually became a private estate of Augustus. Gaul, Syria and Egypt were the most recent additions to the

Roman empire,, They still had to be properly organized. Spain had been a disturbed territory since the rebellion of Sertorius and had to be settled. Augustus got down to creating an administrative infrastructure for all these provinces. Control Over the provinces of Egypt Gaul, Spain and Syria provided Augustus with the immense financial resources that he required to consolidate his position. Besides, he constantly interfered in the provinces which were administered by the senate. Appointments in these provinces had to be made with the consent of the emperor and Augustus saw to it that leading positions were occupied by his loyalists.

Since the emperor did not have an administrative apparatus of his own, Augustus developed an imperial bureaucracy. This bureaucracy was answerable solely to the emperor and was dependent upon him for its authority. The Augustan bureaucracy was recruited mainly from among the equestrians. The equestrians were a distinct class in Roman society, which may be broadly defined as the non-senatorial elite (both plebeian and patrician). This class came into existence in the late republic. The origins of the equestrians lie in the equites of the early republic. The *equites* constituted one of the five classes in the *comitia centuriata*. These were initially, wealthy patricians who served in the cavalry and maintained their horses, at their own expense. Subsequently the cavalry was expanded and the Roman state began to finance a section of this cavalry. Some of these paid horsemen were rich plebeians and they were also included among the *equites*. In the late republic the *equites* were reorganized and the senators were excluded from this class. By this time the cavalry was no longer a crucial part of Roman military organization and the equestrians (equestrian literally means horseman), i.e. those who belonged to the class of *equites*, were now essentially a privileged group in society of which any wealthy and influential person could be a part. With the decline of the *comitia centuriata* the equestrians became more of a social class consisting of the non-senatorial elite. To a large extent

Augustus relied on this class to form his imperial bureaucracy.

Augustus modified some of the official posts which had been created in the late republic to suit his purposes. One of his top priorities was to establish order at Rome and to ensure that the plebeian crowds did not engage in rioting. Moreover, steps had to be taken to prevent the oligarchy from using armed force to capture the city. After the battle of Actium the Roman armies had been stationed in the provinces and on the frontiers of the empire. Instead of using the army for protecting the city of Rome Augustus depended on a special armed contingent called the praetorian guard. The nucleus of the praetorian guard were the imperial bodyguards. In the late republic military commanders had frequently maintained bodyguards at their camp headquarters (praetorium). These personal bodyguards were known as praetorian guards (*cohors praetoria*). Augustus expanded his praetorian guards by inducting highly trained loyal armed contingents to form nine cohorts. Cohorts were infantry units which normally consisted of six centuries (600 soldiers) each. Historians differ over the composition of the cohorts of praetorian guards. The estimate ranges from 500 to 1000 troops in each praetorian cohort.

Of the nine praetorian cohorts of Augustus three were encamped in the vicinity of Rome, and the remaining six were stationed in neighbouring urban centres. Initially the emperor was personally in charge of the praetorian guards but in 2 BC they were placed under the command of a prefect. Later the number of prefects was raised to three. Due to their strategic location in the capital the praetorian guards became a factor in Roman politics after Augustus. At times they were powerful enough to make a person of their choice the emperor. Since they were well-armed and highly trained it was difficult to ignore them.

The overall responsibility for keeping peace in the city was given to a magistrate called *praefectus urbi*. This magistracy had existed since the pre-republican period. Whenever a Roman king went out of the city a *praefectus urbi*

was named as his deputy and he held temporary charge of the government. In the republic such an official had been appointed when both consuls were absent. The post of *praefectus urbi* had fallen into disuse until Augustus revived it. In his time this became a permanent magistracy and was entrusted with the task of preventing disturbances in the capital. The *praefectus urbi* was always a leading senator. He was assisted by a police force which was set up for the first time by Augustus. But the *praefectus urbi* had no jurisdiction over the praetorian guards. Under Augustus's successors the *praefectus urbi* also became the official through whom other magistrates communicated with the emperor. As an additional police force for the capital Augustus formed seven cohorts of *vigiles* or night watchmen. They were placed under a separate prefect who was directly answerable to the emperor. The *vigiles* were assigned the task of fire-fighting in Rome apart from their other duties.

The distribution of free grain rations to poor citizens was vital for keeping discontent within manageable limits in the city. The number of citizens entitled to free grain had been reduced from 320,000 (see chapter eight) to 250,000 by Julius Caesar. According to P.A. Brunt the figure had again risen to 320,000 by 5 BC. The regular distribution of grain rations on such a large scale required an effective system for supply and storage. The possession of a vast empire provided the Roman state with the resources for obtaining large quantities of grain to feed the capital. The entire system was streamlined by Augustus and the province of Africa became the main supplier of grain to Rome. A separate prefect, *praefectus annonae*, was in charge of the branch of administration which looked after public distribution of grain. Augustus revived the census of citizens which had become irregular in the late republic and had almost stopped after Sulla. As many as three censuses were taken during the reign of Augustus. These censuses were useful for compiling lists of citizens and provided information about their wealth and property. The eligibility for free grain rations was determined by the census.

Augustus' did not discard the assembly, but used it to gain legitimacy for his actions. Initially, Augustus sought the approval of the assembly to show that he enjoyed popular support. Meetings of the *comitia tributa* were held from time to time but they were strictly regulated by Augustus's officials. The citizens were merely expected to express their approval by calling out in favour of the proposals or lists of candidates placed before them. Formal procedures for voting were no longer followed and by the end of Augustus's reign meetings of the *comitia tributa* were convened just occasionally. Most of the legislative functions of the assembly were gradually transferred to the senate. Augustus reformed the senate by drastically reducing the number of members. It may be recalled that Sulla had increased the strength of the senate from 300 to 600 members, and under Julius Caesar the number of senators had gone up to 900. Augustus first reduced the seats in the senate to 800 and eventually to 600. Moreover the functioning of the senate was controlled by the emperor through his officials.

Augustus concentrated on consolidating the empire rather than on conquering new territories. After the acquisition of Egypt there was no major expansion of the empire under Augustus. As we have seen, the provinces of Egypt, Syria, Gaul and Spain were directly placed under the emperor. Egypt and Syria already had well established administrative structures. Augustus's main task in these provinces was to reinforce Roman influence and to secure the smooth flow of tribute to Rome. Egypt was treated almost as a personal acquisition of the emperor who appointed an official called *praefectus Aegypti* to govern it on his behalf. Augustus stabilized the eastern borders of Syria by abandoning the policy of military conflict with the Parthians; He focused his attention on securing the existing border of Syria rather than attempting to expand into Parthian territory.

Spain was one of the oldest provinces of Rome, but it had undergone a long period of turmoil since the revolt led

by Sertorius. Augustus reorganized the administration of the province and subjugated the numerous tribes which inhabited the report. Roman presence in Spain had so far been mainly confined to the areas which bordered the Mediterranean. 'Augustus initiated a policy of settling Romans in the northern and western parts of Spain. New colonies were established in Spain and large tracts of land were brought under cultivation. This policy was also extended to Gaul. Vast landed estates called *latifundia* came up in Spain and Gaul. The Augustan era witnessed the growth of new urban centres in Gaul. Garrison towns, administrative urban centres and colonies of Roman settlers became points from where Latin culture was disseminated to the countryside of Spain and Gaul. Augustus vigorously promoted the latinization of the western provinces of the empire.

The promotion of Roman/Latin culture in Spain and Gaul had an impact on the African possessions of Rome lying in the western Mediterranean. The province of Africa was a major centre of Latin culture. Further west, Mauritania (modern Morocco) was latinized due to the efforts of its ruler Juba II who was subservient to Rome. Juba II had spent a long time at Rome and had close personal ties with Augustus. In the eastern Mediterranean Greek and Hellenistic traditions remained paramount. The great Hellenistic cities of Alexandria and Antioch continued to flourish under Augustus. In the ancient Greek cities Augustus gave more autonomy to the local elites thereby improving the municipal Administration and civic life of the *poleis*.

With the 'annexation of Egypt and Syria' the entire Mediterranean had come under Roman rule. The unification of the Mediterranean gave a boost to long-distance seaborne trade. The establishment of peace in the empire facilitated exchanges between different parts of the Mediterranean. The strong Roman military presence in the Mediterranean Sea helped to curb piracy which had often threatened maritime trade.

The immense intellectual output of the Augustan age laid the foundations of classical Latin literature. This was the golden age of Latin writing and produced the most outstanding poets of the language. The three great classical poets, namely, Virgil, Horace and Ovid composed their major works at the beginning of the principate. Virgil (70-19 BC) is generally recognized as the greatest of the three. He wrote an epic known as *Aeneid*. It was begun in 30 BC after the decisive victory of Augustus. The *Aeneid* recounts the adventures of Aeneas, who was married to Creusa, daughter of the king of Troy. Aeneas is supposed to have escaped from Troy after the city had been defeated in the Trojan war. He finally landed in Italy and became king of the Latins. Aeneas was a mythical figure from whom the Roman emperors were supposed to have descended. The *Aeneid* speaks of the historical destiny of the Roman people to civilize the world. The epic glorified the Roman past and was in a sense a celebration of the coming of the Augustan age. Some scholars have suggested that Virgil was commissioned to compose the poem to hail the victory of Augustus. The work, unfortunately, was unfinished at the time of Virgil's death. Apart from the rich poetry of this period, a significant historical account of Rome was written at the beginning of the principate. Livy, one of the leading historians of ancient Rome, produced a massive history of the republic and the first phase of Augustus's reign. Livy's *History* originally contained 142 books, though only summaries of 35 books have survived. Livy's work is indispensable for understanding the transition from the republic to the principate.

The later years of Augustus's rule were marked by growing authoritarianism. The kind of criticism of the government which had been possible in the republican period was no longer tolerated. All dissent was ruthlessly suppressed. Debates on controversial political issues disappeared from public life. The state increasingly began to interfere in private affairs of individuals. Augustus introduced a series of moral reforms from 18 BC onwards.

One of his most well-known laws for imposing a moral code on citizens was *Lex Julia* which made adultery a public offence. This law was defied by his own daughter who was punished by being exiled. In another incident, the poet Ovid was ordered to leave Rome when he was involved in a scandal with which Augustus's granddaughter was connected. Ovid became a bitter critic of the regime and commented upon the personal despotism of Augustus by stating that under him 'The State is Caesar'.

Augustus's success in restoring peace gave him an opportunity to accumulate more and more power at the cost of the senate. The senate was unwilling to resist Augustus precisely because he had demonstrated his ability to put an end to the violent upheavals which the Roman republic had witnessed for over a century. The unending cycle of unrest, civil war, and bloodshed had instilled a mood of despair and helplessness in the Roman ruling class. This mood is reflected in contemporary writings and speeches. In the closing years of the republic the general feeling was that the Roman empire would soon come to an end. In one of his early poems Horace summed up the prevailing sentiment when he said, 'Which of the gods now shall the people summon/To prop Rome's reeling sovereignty'. The episode of Mark Antony's alliance (and marriage) with Cleopatra, and the conflict between Mark Antony and Cleopatra on the one hand and Augustus on the other, had created such a panic at Rome that the people of Rome actually believed the false rumour spread by Augustus's supporters that Mark Antony was trying to make Rome an Egyptian province.

Following the battle of Actium the mood completely changed. Once it was realized that Augustus was in a position to restore peace, the Roman oligarchy was prepared to surrender some of its privileges. We need to understand that the Roman people were fed up with the chaotic conditions of the late republic. If Augustus could restore peace they were not opposed to letting him become a permanent dictator. It was by exploiting the intense desire for peace and stability **that Augustus transformed the**

republic into a Monarchy. The change in the situation after 27 BC was so dramatic that Augustus was looked upon as the saviour of the Roman empire. The writings of the Augustan era reflect a shift from pessimism to a more confident outlook.

The state now began to promote the cult of Augustus and projected him as a semi-divine person. This process had already started after the assassination of Julius Caesar. The Second Triumvirate had claimed legitimacy for itself by glorifying Julius Caesar. In 42 BC, soon after the Second Triumvirate was formed, Julius Caesar had been recognized as a god. As the adopted son and successor of Julius Caesar, Augustus was declared the child of a divine person (*divi filius*). Augustus made the fullest use of the sentiments which were attached to the name of Caesar and added Julius Caesar's family name to his title. The name of Caesar was crucial for justifying the absolute authority of Augustus. Caesar eventually became a title for all Roman emperors and the term survived in different forms up to modern times. For instance, the terms used by the Prussians and Russians for their rulers (Kaiser; Czar) were derived from Caesar.

The achievement of Augustus in restoring order and in giving a new direction to the empire was so remarkable that later generations accorded a special place to him in Roman history. The reign of Augustus was portrayed as marking the inauguration of a long and glorious era of peace and stability which was defined by the term *Pax Romana* ('the Roman peace'). *Pax Romana* was the basis of the prosperity of the empire. It guaranteed the advancement of the people who inhabited the territories ruled by Rome. It was stated that as long as *Pax Romana* lasted, the people would be secure and happy. However, it should be noted that the concept of *Pax Romana* had ideological implications. The Augustan era completed the process of transforming the Roman city state into an empire. *Pax Romana* expressed the idea of a universal empire ruled by Rome. Yet, for all those who were part of the empire, it meant the acceptance of Roman hegemony. *Pax Romana* signified Roman domination,

in the same way as *Pax Britannica* ('the British peace') signified colonial rule for those who were subjects of the British empire in modern times. Since the time of Augustus a widely held view in the Roman empire was that through the establishment of *Pax Romana* Rome was fulfilling a great historical mission. In many ways Augustus was the principal architect of the *Pax Romana* which lasted for several centuries.

II

Augustus died in AD 14. Since he had no surviving direct male descendant he was succeeded by his stepson Tiberius. In AD 4 Augustus had adopted Tiberius, the son of his wife Livia from an earlier marriage, as his heir. The nomination of a successor from within the family was another step in the direction of establishing a hereditary monarchy. Tiberius ruled from AD 14 to 37. It was during his reign that the monarchical character of the Roman state became clearly visible. The emperor was now all powerful. The surviving traditions and institutions of the republic were further ignored till they ceased to have any relevance. It was probably in the time of Tiberius that the *comitia tributa* stopped functioning. The senate was the only republican institution which continued to be important, but it was subordinated to the emperor. Membership of the senate tended to become hereditary, though at the same time aristocratic families from outside Italy (mainly from Spain, Gaul and Africa) were selectively admitted to the oligarchical council. Consuls were still appointed regularly. They were not elected by the assembly but were nominated by the emperor and approved by the senate. The rule that a consul held office for one year was no longer adhered to. Their tenure could now be for just for a couple of months. Consulships were occasionally held by the emperors. At times minors from the imperial family were also made consuls. The consulship was thus reduced to a decorative post.

The Roman armies had held Augustus in very high esteem primarily because he had been a very successful commander. The prestige of Augustus and the sentiments associated with his name (and the name of Julius Caesar) guaranteed the support of the soldiers for Tiberius. Tiberius however was personally not an outstanding military general. His only claim to be emperor was that Augustus had chosen him as successor. Tiberius realized that in the long run this claim might not be sufficient for retaining the throne (we use the term throne only figuratively since there was no special sanctity attached to the throne or seat of the emperor in the Roman state). As we have noted, in the final analysis the emperor's authority rested on brute force. Given that Tiberius had no worthwhile military achievements to his credit he could not be sure that the army would automatically assist him if a crisis arose. Therefore, in order to have adequate force at his disposal he reorganized the praetorian guards.

While Augustus had posted only three praetorian cohorts in the city of Rome, and had stationed the remaining six cohorts in adjoining Italian cities, Tiberius concentrated all the units close to himself. Henceforth the praetorian guards resided permanently in Rome. The guards were placed under one prefect. This prefect had immense influence. Tiberius appointed a person by the name of Sejanus as the praetorian prefect. Sejanus became so powerful that at one stage he was almost the deputy of the emperor. Sejanus and the prefects who succeeded him tended to interfere in every branch of the government. They were often a source of terror for the inhabitants of the capital. The praetorian guards helped Tiberius to consolidate his position. Later emperors had to constantly ensure the support of the praetorian guards to keep themselves in power.

As the Roman monarchy evolved it developed some peculiar features. Till the middle of the third century AD the Roman state remained *theoretically* a republic. The people were supposed to have delegated their authority to the

emperor who ruled on their behalf. In actual practice the emperor was selected from among the oligarchy. The hereditary principle remained very weak and there were very few dynastic successions. The monarchy was essentially *elective* in nature. According to Edward Gibbon (*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*), 'the emperor was elected by the authority of the senate, and the consent of the soldiers'. Although the institution of monarchy survived and was strengthened in the centuries following the death of Augustus, it was marked by considerable instability. The proportion of emperors who were assassinated was very high. Several rulers had very short reigns and there were frequent wars of succession.

From AD 14 to 68 all emperors belonged to the family of Augustus or Tiberius. When Tiberius died in AD 37 he was succeeded by Caligula who was a descendent of Tiberius's brother Drusus. The moral degeneration and cruelty of Caligula made him intensely unpopular. In AD 41 Caligula was killed by his personal attendants. The praetorian guards then placed an uncle of Caligula, named Claudius, on the throne. Incidentally, the mother of Claudius was the daughter of Mark Antony from his marriage with Octavia, sister of Augustus. Claudius made one significant territorial conquest. In AD 42-44 he added Britain to the Roman empire. Claudius died in AD 54, probably as a result of poisoning. He was succeeded by Nero who was the descendant of another daughter of the marriage between Mark Antony and Octavia. In the prevailing atmosphere of mistrust and intrigue Nero was suspicious of all those who might have a claim to the throne. He physically eliminated possible rivals within the family and also killed many of the prominent senators. He became increasingly intolerant of any kind of criticism and went to the extent of killing his mother and aunt. The praetorian guard then decided to get rid of him. He was forced to flee from Rome and committed suicide in AD 68. With the death of Nero the rule of Augustus's family came to an end. It has been remarked that the revolt against Nero was a general reaction against the tyranny and

immoral private, lives of; Augustus's successors rather than against the monarchical system.

For the next one year there was a virtual civil war among army commanders for control of the empire. Nero was succeeded by Galba who had the support of the Roman army in Spain. Galba had been an important official under Claudius. Within a few months he, was killed by the praetorian guards. Otho, one of the, principal officers of the praetorian guards, now, became emperor. Meanwhile the Roman armies in the northern, European province of Germany had Refused to, recognize Otho. The army in Germany was led by Vitellius. Vitellius marched towards Rome with his troops and defeated Otho. Otho committed suicide and Vitellius, was declared emperor. Within the space of just one year after the death of Nero (AD 68-69) three different emperors had occupied their, throne.

At this point the eastern armies, stationed in Syria and Palestine rebelled. They nominated their commander Vespasian as the emperor. Vespasian came from an ordinary family which was not part of *the* aristocracy. He had risen to a high position in the army and had successfully suppressed a major uprising, of the Jews in Palestine (AD 66-70). With his victorious army he marched, to Rome and seized power in AD 69. Vitellius was captured and killed. The reign of Vespasian (AD 69-79),, and his son Titus (AD 79-81) was a period of relative, peace and, stability for, the empire. The authority of the emperor was restored under the family of Vespasian (the family name of Vespasian was Flavius and his dynasty is called the Flavian dynasty). After the death of Titus in AD 81 his brother Domitian became emperor. He ruled for fifteen years and managed to undo what Vespasian and Titus had achieved. Contemporary accounts speak of his excessive brutality. In AD 96 he was assassinated by the praetorian guards.

The collapse of the Flavian dynasty created a political vacuum in the state. The senate tried to fill this vacuum by reasserting itself. It took the initiative to appoint a new emperor. In AD 96 Nerva was made emperor by the senate.

Nerva started the practice of adopting successors during the lifetime of the emperor with the support of the senate and the army. This ensured, smooth successions for the next eighty years. The emperors were chosen with care, particularly with regard to their administrative abilities. Many historians refer to Nerva and his four successors as the 'good emperors' and regard the period from AD 96 to 180 as the 'golden-age' of the empire. It must be pointed out that the selection of the 'good emperors' was based on a wide consensus. The historical reputation of these emperors was not only the result of their capacity to run the government efficiently, but was also an indication of the fact that they were acceptable to a large section of the oligarchy.

Soon after his accession Nerva had adopted a popular general named Trajan as his successor. Trajan became emperor in AD 98. He belonged to an aristocratic family of Spain. By the end of the first century AD the senate had ceased to be a purely Italian body. The oligarchy had accommodated aristocratic families settled in the western provinces of Spain, Gaul, Africa. It has been estimated that under the first two Flavians 75-80 per cent of the senators were Italian. In the next few decades Italians were reduced to about 50 per cent of the total. Since the time of Augustus provincial ruling classes and municipal elites had been a vital component of the central imperial structure. Augustus had raised several members of aristocratic Italian (non-Roman) and provincial families to senatorial and equestrian ranks and had sought their support to counter the influence of the traditional Roman oligarchy. This trend continued under his successors and resulted in the 'provincialization' of the central government. In other words, the landed classes outside Italy were gradually incorporated within the imperial system during the principate. By the mid third century AD the Roman empire had a truly composite ruling class.

Trajan vigorously pursued a policy of territorial expansion. Under him the Roman empire reached its greatest extent. Trajan's military accomplishments made him

all the more powerful and further strengthened the institution of monarchy. So far the river Danube had formed the northern border of the Roman empire in central and eastern Europe. All Roman provinces in this region were located south of the river Danube (the river Danube flows across the middle of central and eastern Europe and falls into the Black Sea). Trajan annexed some of the lands situated across the Danube in eastern Europe and formed these into the new province of Dacia (roughly corresponding to modern Romania). Dacia was rich in gold deposits and this might have been one of the reasons for its annexation.

In West Asia Trajan reversed the policy of Augustus and attempted to subjugate the Parthians. Ever since the Romans had occupied Syria (63 BC) they had been engaged in a prolonged conflict with the Parthians. The Parthians had risen to power under the Arsacid dynasty and had gradually taken over the Seleucid possessions in Iran and Mesopotamia. In chapter eight we saw that Mithridates I of the Arsacid dynasty was the founder of a vast Parthian empire. The Parthians had pushed back the frontiers of the Seleucid empire and at the time of Pompey's eastern campaigns the Seleucids only controlled Syria. During the First Triumvirate the Romans had suffered a serious setback when Crassus was defeated and killed by the Parthians at the battle of Carrhae (53 BC). Subsequently Augustus had abandoned the policy of military conquest of the Parthian empire.

Despite Roman presence in Syria, Palestine and Anatolia the Parthians remained the most formidable political and military force in West Asia. They were responsible for the cultural and linguistic unification of the entire region. Their influence extended far beyond their own frontiers. The Parthians borrowed several aspects of Hellenistic culture but blended these with specific Iranian elements. They promoted the Aramaic language, which had been the official language of the Persian empire prior to Alexander's invasion. Aramaic was originally spoken by some of the tribes living in northern Mesopotamia. Under the Parthians Aramaic, rather

than Greek, became the most widely spoken language of West Asia. An alphabetic script of twenty letters was developed for writing Aramaic. This was the language of the common people even in Roman ruled territories like Syria and Palestine. Aramaic was the language in which Jesus Christ preached.

For over a century after Augustus the Romans preferred to bring only the outlying areas of the Parthian empire under their control. Their main objective throughout this period was to maintain a dominant position in the large mountainous area known as Armenia which lies in Central Asia to the north of Iraq and Iran. At times the Romans briefly ruled over parts of Armenia directly, but more often they placed pro-Roman puppet rulers on the Armenian throne. The Parthians constantly tried to dislodge the Romans from Armenia since this was a strategically located territory on their northern borders. It may be mentioned here that some of the important trade routes linking West Asia and Central Asia passed through Armenia.

Trajan launched a campaign to destroy Parthian power in Armenia and Mesopotamia. Armenia was formally made a province of Rome. Northern Iraq was constituted into a new province of Mesopotamia. The borders of the Roman empire were extended upto the river Tigris and the Parthians were ousted from southern Mesopotamia. This, however, was a costly enterprise and the successor of Trajan realized that it was not practical to militarily control the newly acquired territories. Trajan died in AD 117 and was succeeded by his adopted heir Hadrian. Hadrian withdrew Roman troops from the Tigris and stationed them on the Euphrates. The Euphrates now marked the farthest extent of Roman territories in West Asia. Armenia was placed under a puppet king and ruled indirectly. Nevertheless from Trajan onwards the Romans adopted a more aggressive military policy with regard to the Parthians. This policy speeded up the decline of the Parthian empire and facilitated the rise of a new force in Iran. From the first quarter of the third century AD the territories formerly ruled by the

Parthians came under the Sassanid dynasty of Iran. In AD 223 the Sassanid king Artaxerxes I, or Ardashir (AD 211-241), overthrew the Parthian king Artabanus V. The rise of the Sassanids was a much bigger challenge to the Romans in West Asia than that of the Parthians. Westward expansion of the Sassanid empire during the third century AD took place at the expense of Roman territories in West Asia and Rome had to divert enormous financial and human resources to contain the Sassanid threat.

Hadrian was more concerned about making the borders of the empire safe. In the east the river Euphrates was made the frontier. In Europe a series of permanent military outposts was established along the Danube to prevent tribal incursions. In the British isles the northern parts of the province were fortified by building a defensive wall (called Hadrian's Wall, the remains of which are still extant) to thwart raids into Roman territory. Hadrian toured the provinces extensively and improved the administration of provincial capitals. The reign of Hadrian saw several outstanding achievements in the fields of art and architecture. Hadrian worked out a unique formula to ensure a smooth succession after his death. He adopted Antoninus Pius as his successor and asked Antoninus to simultaneously adopt a young boy named Marcus Aurelius as his (Antoninus's) successor. Antoninus Pius became emperor after the death of Hadrian in AD 138. He was succeeded by Marcus Aurelius (AD 161-180). Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius are together termed to as 'the Antonines'.

Apart from being a competent administrator Marcus Aurelius was a philosopher belonging to the Stoic school. A compilation of his sayings entitled *Meditations* is still read widely. Under him the empire began to adopt a more defensive policy towards tribal groups settled in eastern Europe on the banks of the Danube. Marcus Aurelius found that it was becoming difficult to militarily resist the mounting pressure of these tribes on the Roman frontiers. He attempted to arrive at a settlement with some of these

tribes (see chapter ten). Many of these tribes belonged to the Germanic branch of the Indo-European linguistic family. Aurelius had to undertake several campaigns to push out the Germanic tribes in the Danubian area. These campaigns were a great strain upon the empire.

Upon the death of Marcus Aurelius (AD 180) his son Commodus became the emperor. Commodus had already been associated with the government since AD 177. It soon became apparent that he was unfit to rule. Commodus was killed in AD 192. The army placed an experienced official named Pertinax on the throne. Pertinax belonged to an ordinary family but due to his merit he had been given important responsibilities by Aurelius. He was one of the few associates of Aurelius who had survived the killing of prominent functionaries by Commodus. Pertinax immediately attempted to carry out a reform of the administration and put an end to the disorder caused by Commodus. The praetorian guards resented the stern discipline which he tried to impose and conspired against him. Pertinax was killed within a few months of becoming emperor. The praetorian guards replaced him with a nominee of their choice. The powerful military commanders in the provinces were unwilling to accept this. One of the military commander named Septimius Severus who commanded the troops stationed in south-eastern Europe marched to Rome with his contingents. Septimius entered Rome and was declared emperor AD 193.

Septimius Severus was the first Roman emperor of African origin. He was born at Leptis Magna in Libya. Before him all emperors had belonged to Italy, Spain and southern Gaul. These were the core areas of Latin influence in which Roman aristocratic families were concentrated. The senate would have been reluctant to appoint someone from outside this core area as the emperor. Septimius became emperor with the support of the army. By the second century AD the army was not any longer exclusively Roman or Italian.

Soldiers were recruited from all over the empire.

Hence the army with its mixed composition was not very particular

about the region to which an emperor belonged. This trend intensified in later years and emperors backed by the army had very diverse social backgrounds. Septimius Severus himself contributed to making the Roman ruling class more cosmopolitan by marrying a Syrian woman.

Septimius steadily reduced the role of the senate in the government. The basis of Septimius's power was the army—the state under him may be defined as a military monarchy. He reconstituted the praetorian guards. Provincial urban centres received greater attention under Septimius, but imperial interference in the municipal administration of these cities increased. Septimius died in AD 211 and was succeeded by his son Caracalla. By this time the Roman empire was facing a serious crisis which was reflected in its military, political and economic problems. Septimius had managed to check these problems temporarily but Caracalla was unable to cope with the growing crisis. The steadily increasing cost of defending the empire placed a huge financial burden on the state. As we shall see one of the solutions resorted to by the emperors was debasement of coinage. Another solution was to increase taxes.

One of the significant measures of Caracalla must be viewed in this context. In AD 212 Caracalla extended full citizenship rights to all free inhabitants of the empire. This is an indication of the fact that by the beginning of the third century AD the political privileges associated with citizenship rights had become meaningless. On the other hand it has been suggested that the citizenship rights given by Caracalla made more people liable for paying to various taxes which were payable only by citizens. These included death-duties and the tax levied on a citizen for granting freedom to slaves. Otherwise the extension of citizenship rights had hardly any relevance in political terms.

The reign of Caracalla became increasingly tyrannical and in AD 217 he was murdered by the praetorian guards. One of the prefects of the guards named Macrinus succeeded him. Macrinus was the first Roman emperor who was not a senator or from a senatorial family. Others before him, even

when they came from ordinary families, had become senators during the course of their political or military careers. Macrinus was unacceptable to both the senate and the frontier armies. There was a strong feeling against him among troops stationed in Syria. Caracalla had spent a long time in Egypt and Syria. His mother, Julia Domna (wife of Septimius), was a Syrian and she mobilized the soldiers in favour of her grandnephew Elagabalus. Elagabalus was the head priest of a Syrian solar deity called Baal. The worship of Baal was very popular among Asian troops. In AD 218 Elagabalus became emperor with the support of the Syrian army. Within four years he was killed by the praetorian guards and was succeeded by his first cousin Severus Alexander in AD 222.

Although Severus Alexander had been elevated to the post of emperor by the army he sought the sanction of the senate to stabilize his rule. In return for the endorsement of the senate he revived some of the powers of this institution. He ruled partly with the support of the senate. Alexander restored the authority of the state to a degree, but the crisis of the empire had become too acute. Sharp differences between the emperor and the army on the issue of fighting the Germanic tribes culminated in the ouster of Severus (see next chapter). In AD 235 the emperor was murdered. This date may be said to mark the end of the principate. The principate is sometimes referred to as the early Roman empire to distinguish it from the later Roman empire of the period following the death of Severus Alexander. The structure of the later Roman empire differed in many respects from that of the early Roman empire.

The murder of Severus Alexander was one more instance of the failure to resolve the question of the balance of power between the emperor, the senate, and the army. The army included the praetorian guards but by the second century AD the frontier troops in eastern Europe and West Asia were becoming more and more assertive. These troops were posted for long durations in frontier areas and developed a strong sense of solidarity among themselves. Moreover a

large proportion of them were recruited from the local peasantry and therefore had their roots in the adjoining countryside. It is not surprising that the assertiveness of the frontier troops was reflected in their readiness to back several candidates from the eastern portions of the empire for emperorship. This became one more factor in the triangular conflict between the emperor, the senate, and the army. The Roman oligarchy refused to recognize the claims of candidates who did not hail from Italy, Spain, Gaul or Africa, especially if they had humble origins.

The decision of the army to place Maximinus I on the throne after the assassination of Severus Alexander led to a complete breakdown in the relationship between the senate and the army. Maximinus came from the backward eastern area of Thrace. What is more, he was an ordinary peasant who had joined the army and had gradually risen to high positions under Septimius Severus and Severus Alexander. He spoke poor Latin. Yet he was popular among the troops who declared him emperor. Maximinus did not even bother to seek the approval of the senate. As for the senate, it did not accept Maximinus as emperor. The triangular conflict between the emperor, the senate, and the army intensified further. Anarchy prevailed in the Roman empire for the next fifty years (AD 235 to 284). Nearly twenty emperors were placed on the throne during this period, many of them non-senators supported by the army. Eighteen of these had violent deaths.

The situation began to improve after AD 284 when the emperor Diocletian came to power. Diocletian was a soldier from eastern Europe whose ancestors were probably slaves. He entirely rebuilt the state through measures intended to ensure long-term stability. Heavy taxes were imposed to overcome the acute financial crisis of the government. In order to streamline the administration the empire was divided into four parts. Diocletian ruled over one part directly while autonomous rulers were appointed for the remaining three parts. Each ruler was supreme within his own jurisdiction, though Diocletian laid down overall

policies for the whole empire. Diocletian held charge of Thrace, Egypt, Anatolia and West Asia; Maximian looked after Italy and north Africa; Galerius administered the Danubian provinces; and Constantius had Gaul, Spain and Britain under him. Most historians date the beginning of the later Roman empire from the reign of Diocletian (i.e. AD 284).

Some of the predecessors of Diocletian had experimented with partitioning the empire among joint-rulers for administrative purposes. The empire had become too unwieldy for an effective unified administration. A unified administration could be sustained by a vast central apparatus which required enormous financial resources. It was more convenient to divide the empire into separate semi-autonomous administrative zones. Diocletian's innovation lay in his ability to put in place a workable arrangement of this type. The tetrarchy (rule of the four) established by Diocletian did not lead to a disruption of the empire by rivalries of the four rulers due to the forceful personality of Diocletian. This does not mean that there were no tensions among them, but the experiment was by and large successful.

The scope of the state's activities was enlarged and the regime of Diocletian was on the whole a very oppressive one. The system of tax collection was strengthened. Diocletian ordered a census to be carried out to estimate the quantum of agrarian tax payable to the state. Taxes had to be paid in kind. Since the tax was now assessed on individual cultivated plots (irrespective of ownership), peasants and tenants were bound to their holdings. They could not leave the place where they were registered in the assessment record of the census. This measure greatly benefitted the big landowners. We will discuss this in some more detail later.

Diocletian made administrative units more compact by carving out smaller provinces. As a result of this reorganization the number of provinces was doubled. This made tax collection more efficient. It also reduced the powers of the provincial governors. Provincial governors

were expected to concentrate on their revenue functions and were divested of many of their military duties. Diocletian expanded the imperial bureaucracy by opening it to the middle class (local gentry, petty-traders, urban professionals) which had hitherto been excluded. Military conscription was reintroduced by Diocletian to meet the huge demand for soldiers in the frontier contingents.

It is significant that Diocletian preferred to retain Thrace, Egypt and the Asian provinces for himself when he divided the empire. By the end of the third century AD the eastern parts of the empire were relatively more stable. The triangular conflict between the emperor, the senate, and the army had led to a situation where differences between the western and eastern sections of the empire had become more and more apparent. These differences were linked to the pronounced socio-economic divergence between the two sections. The west (Italy, Gaul, Spain, Africa) was dominated by the Roman landed aristocracy. This aristocracy had traditionally controlled the senate. When, after AD 235, the oligarchy was repeatedly denied the emperorship, the senate lost most of its remaining importance. The emperor and the army joined hands to marginalize the senate. The Roman landed aristocracy was however too powerful to be ignored or controlled. The emperors had to ultimately search for a new basis for their power. The new monarchical state of Diocletian was firmly rooted in the eastern provinces. Here the emperor could exercise unlimited authority without having to bother about the western aristocracy. Diocletian briefly visited Rome on just one occasion. He spent most of his time in the east and eventually made the city of Nicomedia near the Black Sea in northern Anatolia his capital. Interestingly, Diocletian's colleague Maximian who was the ruler of Italy preferred to reside at Milan rather than at Rome so as to avoid the interference of the senate and the praetorian guards in his administration.

In the early Roman empire the main title of the emperor (*imperator*) had been *princeps*. This, as we have observed, was not a royal title. The Roman emperors did not wear any

crown nor did they have any elaborate dress to show their imperial status. The only difference between the dress of the senators and that of the emperor was that whereas the outer garment of a senator had a broad purple-coloured border (*laticlavia*) the entire dress of the emperor was of purple colour {the main outer garment of the Romans was a long unstitched piece of cloth called 'toga'}. The simple dress of the emperors was part of the fiction that the principate was a republic and not a monarchy. Diocletian gave up the pretence that the Roman state was still theoretically a republic. He projected himself as a divine monarch. He started the practice of wearing richly adorned regal dresses. On his head he placed a band or diadem studded with precious stones. Roman emperors had traditionally hesitated to wear a crown and Diocletian's diadem may be considered a substitute for a crown. The title of the ruler also underwent a change. The emperor was no longer called *princeps* but was addressed as *dominus et deus* (divine lord and master). *Dominus* was the term which was most commonly employed by slaves when addressing their masters. The use of this term for the emperors of the later Roman empire has led historians to label this phase of Roman history as the 'dominate'. While the early Roman empire is referred to as the principate, the later Roman empire with its new monarchical traditions is called the dominate. Diocletian introduced court ceremonials which were meant to emphasize the dignity and majesty of the emperor. People were expected to prostrate themselves on the ground when they entered his presence. Scholars have pointed out that Diocletian's conception of monarchy incorporated several features borrowed from the Hellenistic kingdoms, Egypt, and the Sassanids of Iran. As long as the emperor had resided in Rome he had found it difficult, outwardly at least, to abandon the ancient republican traditions of the city. The shift to the east made it easier for Diocletian to adopt those monarchical traditions which were familiar to the people of the region.

Diocletian retired from public life in AD 305. It is not very clear as to why he abdicated the throne when he was at the

peak of his power. Gibbon has suggested that Diocletian's failing health was one of the reasons which prompted his retirement. The former emperor spent the remaining nine years of his life at Salonae (modern Split, in Yugoslavia). He had built a huge palace for himself at this place while he was still on the throne. The magnificent palace of Diocletian at Salonae, the remains of which have survived, is an indication of the pomp and splendour which marked the reign of Diocletian.

Following the retirement of Diocletian there was a brief war of succession. At the end of this war Constantine I (called Constantine the Great) became the sole emperor of the empire in AD 324. Constantine was the son of Constantius who had been one of the co-rulers in Diocletian's tetrarchy. Before he became sole emperor, Constantine had ruled over the empire for several years as co-emperor with other partners. Diocletian's scheme of partitioning the empire had continued for about two decades after he abdicated. The arrangement eventually broke down and by AD 324 Constantine brought the whole empire under his unified control after a brief civil war.

Constantine completed the process of shifting the seat of the emperor to the east. Between AD 324 and 330 he built a new capital for himself at the south-eastern extremity of Europe. The site of his capital was the ancient city of Byzantium on the Sea of Marmara. The strategically located Sea of Marmara separates the European and Asian parts of modern Turkey. This sea is a narrow passage which connects the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. The city founded by Constantine was named Constantinople (now Istanbul). Constantinople became the main administrative centre of the empire and later on it was the capital of the Byzantine empire for many centuries. With this the political role of the city of Rome came to an end. Henceforth the senate was not even formally consulted on state matters. Constantine disbanded the praetorian guards thereby eliminating another major component of the principate. Constantine established a parallel senate in Constantinople. The senate

of Constantinople had primarily municipal functions. Its members were drawn from the provincial elites of the east. The new senate was totally subservient to Constantine. Legislative powers were now concentrated in the hands of the emperor. By the time Constantine passed away in AD 337 the character of the Roman state had undergone yet another significant transformation. Diocletian and Constantine were the main architects of this transformation.

Not only was the character of the Roman state transformed in the first half of the fourth century AD but its geographical focus had moved from Italy to the eastern Mediterranean. In the latter half of the fourth century AD the eastern and western portions of the empire become distinct entities. Barring a few brief exceptions the immediate successors of Constantine found it impossible to keep the two parts united. After AD 395 the empire was permanently split into two separate halves—the Western Roman empire and the eastern Roman empire (also called Byzantine empire). As a matter of fact it is inaccurate to speak of a Roman empire after the fourth century AD. The historical reality was that there was only an empire in the east with Constantinople as its capital. In the west there was no centralized state structure. As a result of the decline of the city of Rome the western oligarchy gradually withdrew to its huge landed estates in the countryside of Italy, Spain and Gaul. The western empire broke up into smaller units which were controlled partly by the powerful nobility and partly by Germanic tribal chiefs. An entirely new socio-economic structure emerged in the west which created the preconditions for the development of feudalism. These changes need to be viewed in the context of the evolution of the Roman economy which we will examine in the next section.

III

In the course of our discussion on the republican period we have examined the nature of class differentiation in Rome. At the beginning of the republic there was a small patrician

landowning aristocracy which had taken over power after the expulsion of the Etruscan kings. The majority of citizens were ordinary plebeian peasants, most of whom had their own plots of land. There were some cultivators who provided labour for the big landowners. These were mainly free tenant farmers. We cannot rule out the possibility of some unfree labour being employed by the aristocracy, but at the beginning of the republic their numbers must have been negligible. In any case the holdings of the aristocracy were as yet not sufficiently large to require extensive labour.

Roman expansion in central Italy c. 500-300 BC placed vast tracts of agricultural land at the disposal of the landed aristocracy. Most of this land was in the form of *ager publicus* which was leased out to the wealthy patricians who controlled the state. A part of the *ager publicus* was leased to managers called *conductores* and yielded a good profit to the state. There was a continuous struggle between the aristocracy and the poor peasants over the distribution of the *ager publicus*. As a result of this struggle some of the *ager publicus* was allotted to impoverished peasants while some of it was used to establish Roman colonies. This distribution enabled individual peasants to mobilize resources for serving in the army, which was crucial for the next phase of expansion within and outside Italy. Moreover, due to this struggle restrictions were set on the amount of land that a person could take on lease (see chapter eight). The aristocracy however managed to ignore the restrictions and continued to acquire large estates by taking over more and more of the *ager publicus*. These estates were occupied by them almost permanently and dues owed to the state were rarely paid. After a few generations the public land in Roman territories virtually became private property of the aristocracy.

The massive expansion which began with the Punic Wars gave an opportunity to the aristocracy to obtain land on an unprecedented scale. The benefits of the wars of expansion accrued mostly to the senatorial oligarchy. On the other hand the *assidui* farmers, who formed the backbone of

the Roman infantry, had to bear the full burden of fighting these wars. The wars impoverished them and physically eliminated a very large proportion of the *assidui*. P.A. Brunt (*Italian Manpower*) has estimated that at the beginning of the Hannibalic War there were approximately 100,000 *assidui*. According to him the majority of the plebeians had become propertyless by the time the Second Punic War ended. There was also a very heavy loss of men in this war.

One significant outcome of the conflict of the orders in the early republic was the abolition of *nexum* in 326 BC. The impoverishment of the peasants had forced them to seek regular loans from the rich. Failure to repay loans resulted in enslavement of the debtor under the very rigid Roman law of *nexum*. Debt bondage had allowed the landed aristocracy to acquire unfree labour for their estates. After 326 BC it became difficult to convert free Roman peasants into unfree labour. The shortage of labour became all the more acute when the wealthy landowners successfully cornered the land annexed in Italy and overseas after c. 300 BC. As the size of aristocratic holdings increased manifold, there was a corresponding increase in the demand for labour.

The peasants were victorious in their struggle against debt bondage but their fight for retaining possession over their land remained unsuccessful. Frequent military campaigns after 300 BC deprived the *assidui* of their means of livelihood. Procuring weapons and armour was a costly affair. The peasant soldier had to additionally support himself and his family for the duration of a campaign. The duration tended to get longer after c. 270 BC. What is more, military campaigns removed working hands from the fields. Many of the able-bodied male adults were actually killed in the wars. As a consequence of these problems the peasants lost their holdings to the aristocracy. Land redistribution might have been a solution but the failure of the Gracchan agrarian reforms and the violence which was unleashed to obstruct the programme of the Gracchus brothers put an end to that possibility once and for all. The bulk of the peasants

became *proletarii*. Landless *proletarii* could have met the demand [or labour to some extent. But the historical circumstances prevailing in the late republic, which we have already outlined in the previous chapter, enabled the *proletarii* to extract a major concession from the aristocracy: free grain rations. Once the *proletarii* were assured of their basic requirement of food they had no inclination to leave the city of Rome and work on the landed estates of the rich.

The developments following the abolition of *nexum* caused the internal supply of labour to shrink. This, according to Finley, is one of the preconditions for the growth of large-scale slavery. The aristocracy could now carry on production on its large landed estates, called *latifundia*, by using slave labour. Slavery was already widespread in Greece and the eastern Mediterranean. There was an infrastructure for capturing and supplying slaves. Slaves were an important commodity in the trade of the Mediterranean world for several centuries. Greek states had evolved elaborate legal provisions pertaining to this form of property, thereby institutionalizing it. Since the system of slave-based production was already prevalent in the Mediterranean region much before 326 BC it is possible that slave labour might have been present to a limited extent on Roman landed estates in the early republic.

The wars which ravaged the Greco-Roman world for three hundred years, from Alexander's invasions to the battle of Actium, provided an ideal opportunity for the expansion of the slave trade. Nevertheless, the possibilities of the slave trade in Greece were quite limited due to the small size of landed estates. The landed estates of the Roman aristocracy in Italy, Spain, Gaul and Africa opened up prospects which would have been unimaginable before the Roman empire came into existence. The *latifundia* in these regions absorbed ever-increasing numbers of slaves. It was on the Roman *latifundia* that ancient slavery reached its fullest development. War and piracy sustained slave-based production on these estates. Slaves were first employed on a large scale in rural and urban production in the Greek

states. The potential of this form of labour was fully realized in the Roman economy with the emergence of the *latifundia*.

Brunt has drawn attention to the fact that on the eve of the Second Punic War the total population of Italy (including Cisalpine Gaul) was about 5 million. According to the estimates worked out by him for the year 225 BC, 4.4 million of these were free inhabitants (at this time there were 100,000 *assidui*), while 600,000 were slaves. By the end of the republic the total population had risen to 7 million. Brunt's figures are for the year 43 BC. He has argued that the rise in population between 225 and 43 BC is to be attributed to a phenomenal increase in the number of slaves. Whereas the free population had remained static or was declining, the number of slaves had gone up from 600,000 to 3 million. This figure pertains only to Italy. The reorganization of the empire by Augustus led to the extension of agriculture and of slavery in Spain and Gaul. The *latifundia* worked by slave-labour became the basis of the agrarian economy of the western provinces.

In Italy, the peasantry rapidly disappeared after 200 BC. This process gathered more momentum after the Third Punic War. The Third Punic War coincided with wars in Greece, Macedonia and Syria. Together all these wars gave a boost to the slave trade. War captives were brought to Mediterranean ports in large numbers. The Romans declared the island of Delos in the Aegean Sea a free port (167 BC). Delos became the foremost Mediterranean port for the slave trade. The disruption caused by incessant fighting in the eastern Mediterranean and West Asia between c. 150 and 31 BC encouraged piracy in this region. When Pompey was sent to the east after the recall of Lucullus, one of the principal tasks entrusted to him was the eradication of piracy in the area. When Augustus became princeps, one of his first priorities was the suppression of pirates who had become active in the disturbed conditions caused by the civil war between Augustus and Mark Antony. Piracy was checked for a while, but it never disappeared. Piratical raids remained vital for augmenting the supply of slaves. This

was particularly so after the establishment of *Pax Romana*. Between the reigns of Augustus and Trajan there were few large-scale military campaigns. Pirates and military adventurers made regular forays into the relatively backward areas on the periphery of the empire to obtain slaves. The tribes inhabiting the area around the Black Sea were their favourite targets.

In the late republic the Roman empire was flooded with cheap slave labour. These slaves were put to work on the latifundia of Italy, Spain, Gaul and the province of Africa. The huge surplus which the aristocracy derived from agrarian production based on slave labour made it fabulously rich. The era of peace and stability ushered in by the Augustan age allowed the Roman ruling class to amass more wealth. The estates of big landowners in classical Greece bear no comparison with the size of the latifundia. In the Greek states, large holdings ranged in size from 75 to 100 acres. Estates above 100 acres were unusual. The latifundia of the Roman aristocracy were normally several thousand acres in size. Even ordinary latifundia could be of 3000 acres and above. The really big latifundists possessed holdings amounting to several hundreds of thousands of acres. For example we have reference to one landowner having more than 200,000 acres of land in the first century BC. In the reign of Nero just six families reportedly owned half of the province of Africa (by this time the province of Africa was no longer confined to former Carthaginian possessions in Tunisia but had been considerably enlarged).

As in the case of the Greek states, Roman law recognized slaves as a form of property. The commonly used term for a slave was *servus*. Roman law evolved a much more comprehensive understanding of the concept of private property and this concept applied to slaves as well. The authority of the master over the slave was absolute. Slaves were commodities to be bought and sold in the market in the same way as cattle. The complete legal deprivation which slaves suffered denied them any sort of place in society. The slaves were mere objects, with no rights

whatsoever. The utter degradation of the slaves through the apparatus of the state, especially through law and legal institutions, was crucial to cope with the presence of such an extraordinarily large slave population within Roman society.

Slaves might have been property but they were a peculiar form of property. They were, after all, human beings as well. As human beings they could think, communicate, develop ties with other human beings, and make efforts to improve their status. The Roman state had adequate force at its disposal to ensure that slaves did not attempt to free themselves. In the long run, however, it was not very practical or cost-effective to perpetuate slavery through the constant use of force. The values which Roman society as a whole imbibed, through law and in various other ways, served to divest slaves of any kind of dignity. These values taught free persons not to have any sympathy with slaves. As for the slaves, they were humiliated to such an extent that it was not easy for them to be conscious of the fact that they were human beings.

Slaves captured from a particular area were not allowed to live together. They were dispersed as widely as possible and slaves from one area were mixed up with slaves from other areas. This ensured that they did not form any ties of solidarity. Slaves employed on a particular estate could be speaking different languages. Slaves retained no kinship ties and maintained no families. The only relationship that they had was with their master and this was a relationship of complete subjugation. Slaves had no identity of their own. They did not even keep their own names but were called by names given to them by their masters.

This does not mean that there were no attempts by slaves to free themselves. Slaves did try to run away, especially in areas where conditions might be unsettled. Unlike nineteenth century America where slaves were invariably Black and therefore easily distinguishable, or Greek slaves who were mostly non-Greeks and could be recognized because they did not speak the Greek language,

Roman slaves had diverse geographical origins. In an empire which itself was so cosmopolitan it was difficult to immediately spot a slave who might have escaped. Apart from individual flight, there were minor organized rebellions. Unfortunately contemporary sources hardly mention such uprisings. We do know of three major slave revolts, all which occurred in the late republic. The most serious of these was the Spartacus revolt of 73-71 BC which we have mentioned in the previous chapter.

The first big slave revolt, known as the First Slave War (136-132 BC), took place in Sicily. The slaves on the *latifundia* of this large island worked under the worst possible conditions ever since it was annexed by the Romans. In the Roman campaigns against the Seleucid ruler Antiochus III a huge number of Syrian and Anatolian prisoners of war had been made agricultural slaves in Sicily. In 136 BC a slave by the name of Eunus killed his owner and organized the slaves on the Sicilian estates to launch a struggle against the cruel oppression of the Roman landlords. Eunus, who was from Apamea in Syria, was a religious leader and he used the religious sentiments of Syrian slaves to mobilize them. He assumed the name of Antiochus and declared himself king. Many Greek settlements in Sicily acknowledged his kingship. The uprising was crushed in 132 BC. Nevertheless, Eunus continued to be a source of inspiration for the Sicilian slaves. In 104 BC another slave rebellion, known as the Second Slave War (104-102 BC) broke out on the island. This was led by Salvius and Tryphon. Tryphon was originally a flute-player by profession. A number of slaves from Athens and other parts of mainland Greece played an important role in mobilizing support for this revolt. The revolt lasted for two years and the slave rebels were defeated in 102 BC.

We have referred to the Spartacus revolt in the previous chapter. The revolt started in Capua (in Campania, near modern Naples). It soon spread to most of southern Italy. Sicily was once again an important centre of the revolt. Spartacus was a brilliant military leader. He organized an

army of 90,000 supporters. Oenomaus and Crixus were two of the prominent associates of Spartacus. This army contained a large number of slaves belonging to Celtic and Germanic tribes. For over two years Spartacus's army controlled most of southern Italy. The Romans had to launch a large-scale military offensive under Crassus to suppress the revolt.

Slave labour was to be found in every sector of the Roman economy. Agriculture, mining, and handicraft production were the sectors in which they were most numerous. Slaves accounted for as much as 90 per cent of handicraft production. Slaves were also employed as clerks in government offices. There was a category of state-owned slaves which was employed at the lowest levels of the administration to carry out various tasks which involved a lot of toil and drudgery. Given that there were a such a large number of slaves and that they were engaged in such diverse activities it is not surprising that there was a hierarchy even among the slaves. At one end there were skilled slaves, many of whom were used in a supervisory capacity on the latifundia. Some of the outstanding artisans and administrative personnel also came from this group. Then there were the semi-skilled and unskilled slaves who were occupied in agricultural production or as domestic workers. The majority of the slaves worked on latifundia. The unskilled agricultural slaves were often bound by chains. The chained slaves formed the lowest category. These slaves, as well as those engaged in mining, worked under the most horrible conditions. The slaves on latifundia were usually split up into small teams. Each team had its own supervisor who might also be a slave. The latifundia would be divided into units of 150-200 acres and one team of slaves would be allotted to each unit. The entire slave workforce of the latifundia was placed under an overseer (*villicus*).

The Roman oligarchy had created vast latifundia in Italy, Spain, Gaul and Africa by merging their private holdings in these areas with huge estates leased from the government.

Eventually it became impossible to distinguish between the two and the big landowners permanently occupied public land. The emperors possessed their own latifundia in a personal capacity. Since the time of Augustus most of Egypt was treated as the private domain of the emperor. While production on the royal estates was generally organized by imperial servants directly, a portion of the land in Egypt was granted to individuals. In Greece small peasant proprietors remained important. West Asia and Egypt did not develop as slave economies and in these regions the Roman ruling class was superimposed over existing methods of production and surplus extraction. Egypt was ruthlessly exploited throughout the period of Roman rule and there is evidence for widespread soil-exhaustion in this country during the later Roman empire. The declining productivity of agriculture in Egypt aggravated the economic problems of the empire in the third century AD.

The latifundists took care not to concentrate all their holdings in one place. The holdings were widely distributed so as to escape the uncertainties of weather conditions. The tendency was to occupy the most fertile areas of the empire. In Italy, where latifundia had replaced small holdings by the end of the republic, surviving peasants were pushed to the least productive lands. Latifundia tended to absorb smaller holdings. Trajan had introduced a rule which required all senators to invest one-third of their wealth in Italy (the proportion was reduced to one-fourth by Marcus Aurelius) and this must have led to more acquisitions being made by the oligarchy at the expense of the smallholders. The rich plain of Campania in the western part of central Italy was one of the most productive regions of the peninsula and almost all the cultivable land here was converted into latifundia. As compared to western Italy, the soil of the Apennine region was rocky and of poor quality. The aristocracy ousted the peasants from the fertile plains of the west, especially Campania, and confined them to the mountainous and marginal tracts in the east. The latifundia of Italy concentrated on cultivation of

cereals and rearing of sheep and cattle. In fact, in some parts of Italy, pasturage became more important than agriculture. In southern Italy many of the latifundia were converted to horse-ranches. Olive and vine cultivation was gradually shifted to the estates of Spain and Gaul, while Africa and Egypt became the main suppliers of wheat to the Italian cities. The Cisalpine region of north Italy specialized in production of millet and pork. The staple crops of the latifundia in Spain, Gaul and the province of Africa were olive, vine and wheat. Southern Gaul began to specialize in production of good quality wines. Only the big landowners had the necessary resources to promote new olive and vine plantations. The grapevine begins to provide its full yield several years after it has been planted. In the case of olives, it takes an entire generation for a tree to reach maturity. The produce of the olive tree is collected in alternate years. The kind of investment that this implied was easier for the wealthy landowners.

In no society throughout human history did the use of slaves attain the same magnitude as in ancient Rome. Rome, like Greece, was not just a *society with slaves*, but a *slave society*. According to Finley Greco-Roman society may be regarded as a slave society because slave labour was employed on a large scale in production. This is also the view of most Marxist scholars. Marxist historians have defined the Greco-Roman social formation a slave social formation. This does not mean that all production was based on slave labour in Greco-Roman antiquity. What this means is that the slave mode of production was the dominant mode of production in the Greco-Roman world. A mode of production is the sum total of the means of production and relations of production. Means of production are the objects, tools, and technology involved in production. Relations of production refers to the manner in which the means of production (land, cattle, tools, etc.) are controlled, and the relationship of all those who are part of a production process to one another (e.g., slave-master; serf-lord; worker-capitalist).

The relations of production determine how the surplus is extracted and redistributed. In a class society each mode of production has its own specific mechanism for extracting or taking away the surplus from the actual producer. This mechanism may be called the surplus extraction relationship and is the basic feature of the relations of production of a mode of production. The surplus extraction relationship gives its name to the mode of production. Thus a system where surplus extraction takes the form of slavery, i.e. the actual producers are slaves and those who take away the bulk of the surplus are slave-owners, will be called a slave mode of production. A given society may have various modes of production coexisting side by side. Greco-Roman society had free peasant production alongwith slavery. However there will be one dominant mode of production and it is this dominant mode of production which will determine the nature of the social formation. For instance in nineteenth century USA there was widespread slavery on the plantations of the southern states while there was also the capitalist mode of production in the country. The slave economy served the interests of the capitalist economy and was therefore subservient to it. It is for this reason that we regard the capitalist mode of production as the dominant mode of production in nineteenth century America and characterize it as a capitalist social formation and not as a slave social formation. Similarly, the ancient Greco-Roman social formation was a slave social formation since the slave mode of production was the dominant mode of production.

Historians are of the unanimous view that slaves were present in large numbers in ancient Greece and Rome (more in Rome than in Greece) and that at least in Rome a substantial proportion of them were engaged in production. Nevertheless there is considerable difference of opinion over the precise role of slavery in the production process. On the one hand there are scholars, mainly non-Marxists, who hold that the role of slavery has been exaggerated and that slaves did not occupy a central place in the economy. The non-Marxist argument is that slaves were too few in relation to

peasants and free labour. Slaves were just one category of labour and not the most important category. Yet there are different shades of opinion among non-Marxists on this question. As we have noted, Finley who is a leading authority on the subject and is a non-Marxist, strongly feels that Greco-Roman society was a slave society.

On the other hand, Marxists generally attach great significance to slave labour in the context of the Greco-Roman economy. Marx himself noted that slavery was the decisive invention of the Greco-Roman social formation. Though Marx and Engels wrote on various aspects of Greco-Roman antiquity, they did not attempt a full-length study of the slave social formation. Engels in his *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* made a relatively detailed statement on the Marxist understanding of ancient Greece and Rome, but this was more by way of a useful framework which later historians could use. It is only recently—a full century after *Origin of Family, Private Property and State* was written—that a comprehensive Marxist account of the slave social formation has been published. The British historian Geoffrey de Ste. Croix has written a monumental work entitled *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (1981) which covers 1400 years of Greek history down to the Arab conquests. Ste. Croix's book tries to explore the dynamics of the slave mode of production from a Marxist viewpoint in much greater detail than has been attempted so far. *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* is not confined to Greece, as the title might suggest, but contains an exhaustive discussion on Roman slavery as well. Ste. Croix has surveyed the diverse forms which surplus extraction relationships took in the Greco-Roman world.

There were first of all various indirect ways in which surplus was extracted by the ruling class. These included the taxes imposed by the state. The Athenians and Romans collected a large tribute from the territories over which they had established their hegemony. Roman taxes increased manifold in the principate and dominate. In classical Athens and during the late republic and early principate in Rome

the burden of taxes on citizens was relatively light. The Athenian state levied no regular taxes on the citizens, and in Rome citizens residing in Italy were exempted from paying *tributum*, the main tax on land and individuals, after 167 BC (see previous chapter). But citizens were taxed in another way: they had to perform unpaid military service for the state and had to procure their own fighting equipment. In the words of Marx, it was through wars that 'the Roman Patricians destroyed the Plebeians, by compelling them to serve as soldiers, . . . and made paupers of them'. Ste. Croix draws attention to other compulsory services which had to be performed for the state. He cites the example of *angaria*, a type of compulsory service for the state which was prevalent in West Asia. This labour could be requisitioned for all kinds of official purposes like carrying loads, repairing buildings, assisting the provincial functionaries in tasks ranging from maintaining roads to doing disagreeable jobs connected with execution or punishment of convicts.

Besides the various indirect forms of surplus extraction, there were numerous direct ways in which surplus was extracted. Ste. Croix agrees that peasants, free smallholders, wage-labourers, tenants and sharecroppers were present in large numbers in the agricultural sector. These categories produced a large share of the agrarian surplus. However, after analyzing the available evidence he has stressed that *slavery was the major surplus extraction relationship*, especially in Italy and the western provinces of the Roman empire. This does not necessarily imply that the majority of the actual producers were slaves. Ste. Croix's contention is that it was through slavery that the aristocracy acquired most of its surplus. As slavery was the dominant surplus extraction relationship, i. e. modes of production were organized under its domination, the Roman social formation may be called a slave social formation.

A few recent studies by Marxist scholars have questioned the assumption that the Greek and Roman social formations were identical. Ellen M. Wood in her work

Peasant-Citizen and Slave: The Foundations of Athenian Democracy makes a clear distinction between Greek and Roman slavery. She has argued that the Roman empire was the only social formation in history which may be correctly characterized as a slave social formation.

According to her ancient Greece, unlike Rome, was essentially a peasant economy. Though there was widespread slavery in Greece, slaves were marginal to the production process. In the Greek states slaves were mainly used for mining and for domestic work in urban areas. The countryside was dominated by peasants who had some control over their land and produce. This was particularly true of Athens where political participation by ordinary citizens helped to stabilize the position of the peasantry and made it difficult for the aristocracy to exploit the smallholders beyond a certain point. Greek landed estates never reached the size that they did in Rome after 200 BC and the small peasantry of the Greek states did not disappear like it did in Italy. The Greek peasant soldiers, i.e. hoplites, did not have to bear the kind of burden which Roman peasants had to bear due to the enormous scale of Roman expansion. She concludes that the conditions in Greece differed fundamentally from those of Rome. Rome should be treated as an exception due to the sheer scale of its expansion which allowed it to use slave labour so extensively. Wood's study leaves unanswered the question as to how we should explain the large proportion slaves in Athens as compared to citizens. The ratio of slaves to citizens in the classical period was 3:1. It would not have been economically practical to have such a large proportion of slaves doing domestic work in wealthy urban households. In any case, even Wood agrees that slave labour was vital for the Roman economy. In the following chapter we will see how problems of the slave mode of production produced a crisis in the Roman economy and led to the decline of the Roman empire.

Chapter Ten

ANCIENT ROME: CRISIS AND DECLINE

THE expansion of the Roman empire had created conditions for the development of the slave mode of production in Italy, Spain, Gaul and north Africa. The establishment of *Pax Romana* had sustained the growth of slave-based production. However the Roman peace itself became an obstacle for this mode of production. There was very little expansion of the empire between the reigns of Augustus and Trajan. Following the death of Trajan in AD 117, no new territories were added to the empire. Wars of expansion had placed a vast slave labour-force at the disposal of the Roman landed aristocracy. From the Augustan era onwards there were very few territorial conquests. Consequently there were fewer opportunities for capturing slaves in large numbers. The annexation of Britain, Roman consolidation in northern Gaul, the acquisition of Dacia, and the extension of the eastern frontiers beyond the Euphrates did help in maintaining the supply of slaves down to AD 117. Moreover, frequent skirmishes with tribal groups settled on the periphery of the empire in northern Africa and in central and eastern Europe, as well as the continuous conflict with the Parthians, allowed slave traders and pirates to launch regular raiding expeditions to procure slave's.

Nevertheless, the overall trend during the first hundred years of the principate was a fall in the supply of slaves. In

the post-Trajan period the problem became even more serious. Large-scale capture of slaves was dependent upon large-scale wars. Raiding expeditions into neighbouring territories, especially in tribal settlements, could supplement supplies. But this was possible only as long as the empire remained militarily strong. By the end of the second century AD Rome was finding it difficult to contain the threat of tribal incursions and under these circumstances raiding expeditions for slave-capture could not be supported by the army.

The shortage of slaves was reflected in the rising prices of slaves. According to the estimates of A.H.M. Jones slave prices in the second century AD were eight to ten times higher than in the second and first centuries BC. There was a general shortage of manpower due to two major outbreaks of plague in this period. The empire was ravaged by plague in AD 165 and again in AD 250. This led to a sharp decline in population. As labour became scarce the landed aristocracy resorted to new methods of surplus extraction. Ste. Croix has argued that by the second century AD it was no longer profitable to invest in slaves.

Initially the high cost of purchasing slaves was balanced by increasing the level of exploitation of slaves. But this was not possible beyond a certain point since most of the agricultural slaves already lived much below the basic subsistence level with hardly any food or clothing. The chained gangs of slaves working on latifundia toiled for long hours and there were absolute physical limits to the amount of labour they could be forced to do. Mortality rates, it must be noted, among these slaves were very high. The miserable conditions in which they lived was an important cause of death. As slaves became more and more expensive it was no longer easy to replace the slaves who had died. The first response of the latifundists to this situation was to exploit the slaves even more, i. e., they tried to increase the *rate of exploitation*. This would have resulted in even faster deaths. Besides, as we have observed, this was not a practical solution beyond a certain extent. A point of crisis was reached by the second century AD.

The crisis in the slave mode of production necessitated some modifications in the system. This was all the more so due to the fact that Roman agriculture was technologically stagnant and there were hardly any significant improvements in methods of cultivation in the empire. The availability of cheap slave labour itself was an impediment to technological progress because there was little inclination to introduce labour-saving techniques. The slaveowners tried to cope with the crisis in other ways. Slave-breeding became a significant economic activity which helped to overcome the shortage of labour for some time. However, human reproduction is a complicated matter. Successful human reproduction depends on various cultural and biological factors. The ratio of female slaves to male slaves has also to be taken into account and this ratio might not always have been favourable, especially on the big *latifundia*. Ste. Croix suggests that slaveowners sought to improve the chances of reproduction by encouraging male and female slaves to develop loose family bonds. Such slaves began to form matrimonial and kinship ties among themselves and ceased to be mere commodities. Some of them were settled on individual plots within the large estates and these plots were cultivated by the slaves with their family labour. Many of the big landowners did not any longer directly organize production on their *latifundia* but entrusted this task to slave families which were attached to small plots and had to give a part of their produce to their owners. Under this new system there was a slight improvement in the status of the slave.

The requirements of slave-breeding had led to the betterment of the slave's status in many cases (due to family ties; having their own holdings; no longer being regarded exclusively as commodities etc.). In urban areas too there were some changes. Roman law had a provision which entitled slaves to own some property. This form of property was called *peculium*. With the permission of their owners, slaves could set aside some of their produce or their earnings as *peculium*. Of course it was the owners who determined

the quantum of the *peculium*. This type of property had legal recognition and could be used by the slaves to engage in economic activities on their own account. There are references to slaves who invested their *peculium* in trade, moneylending, and production. They could themselves own slaves. Part of the profits earned in this manner were handed over to the owner while the remainder was added to the slave's *peculium*. The *peculium* acted as an incentive for the slaves to earn profits by taking the initiative to organize their own business. These profits were shared by their masters. This was a more efficient way of utilizing the skills of the better trained slaves. The *peculium* was not confined to urban areas but extended to rural areas as well.

As compared to Greece, where instances of slaves being set free were rare, the incidence of manumission (releasing a person from slavery) was much higher in Rome. Manumission was a formal act and required a legal declaration. The Roman state levied a tax on manumission. The manumitted slave acquired the same civic rights as those of his or her master. Slaves who had been set free owed certain obligations to their former owners which they had to render whenever called upon to do so. Manumitted slaves were often employed in a supervisory capacity in the establishments of their former masters. Manumission was more of an urban phenomenon and it is unlikely that the lowest category of slaves, i.e., the agricultural slaves working in chained gangs, ever had any hope of manumission.

Ste. Croix points out that in the long run slave-breeding was less profitable than slave capture. The modifications in the slave system had the cumulative effect of reducing the *rate* of exploitation. If the rate of exploitation decreased the aristocracy could keep up its lavish lifestyle only by adopting other methods of surplus extraction. If other means of exploitation could be used then the overall *volume of surplus extraction* could be maintained. This the aristocracy succeeded in doing by placing a greater burden on free peasants, tenant farmers and hired agricultural workers.

These groups were unable to resist the growing exactions of the aristocracy in the west (Italy, Spain and Gaul) due to the enormous power wielded by the big landlords in this part of the empire. In the words of Ste. Croix, 'The inevitable consequence is that the propertied class cannot maintain the same rate of profit from slave labour, and, to prevent its standard of living from falling, is likely to be driven to increase the rate of exploitation of the humbler free population—as I believe the Roman ruling class now actually did, by degrees'.

From the second century AD onwards the landed aristocracy began to depress the status of the free cultivators known as *coloni*. The *coloni* had originally been tenant farmers. This class of cultivators should not be mixed-up with the settlers in a colony. The members of Roman and Italian colonies (*colonia*) were also known as *colonus* (plural *coloni*). The term *coloni* had another meaning: it referred to free tenant farmers who did not own their land. It is in this latter sense that we are using it here. These tenant farmers were cultivators of very limited means. They did not normally have their own implements and could not afford to purchase seeds for sowing. The landlords provided them with implements and seeds and the *coloni* had to hand over a share of their produce, usually in kind, to the owners. The *coloni* were essentially sharecroppers. The share taken away from them by the landlords represented rent on land and repayment for implements and seeds given to them. The poverty of the *coloni* explains their dependent status.

Though the *coloni* had been free tenants—they could move to other plots at their will—in reality they were gradually tied to the landowners. By the second century AD the landowners were taking advantage of the dependent status of the *coloni* to extort a larger share from them. The *coloni* lost their freedom to move from one place to another and were bound to their plots. The taxation measures of Diocletian formalized this arrangement by prohibiting cultivators to leave the place where they were registered in the tax assessment records. In the reign of Constantine more

legal provisions were introduced to permanently attach the *coloni* to the soil. These provisions laid down that *coloni* be transferred with the land if there was a change of ownership. The status of the *coloni* now approximated to that of the medieval serfs. Strictly speaking, *coloni* cannot be equated with serfs since classical serfdom had several other implications in terms of the authority of the feudal lord which evolved during the course of the next few centuries. But the essence of the serf's status is already to be found among the *coloni*. With the growing crisis in the slave mode of production there was a tendency to reduce smallholders, free agricultural labourers and other sections of the rural workers to the status of *coloni* by dominant landed groups.

At times entire peasant villages sought the protection of powerful nobles against the oppression of corrupt officials or to escape the heavy taxation imposed by the dominate. The peasants would surrender their land and liberty to a noble who would then grant back the land to the peasants in the form of a tenancy. This was the phenomenon of *patrocinium* which became widespread by the fourth century AD. The peasants received the protection of the big landowners or strong local commanders to whom they had voluntarily submitted, but they lost their freedom and ownership of their land. They were now tenants bound to the estates of the nobles and their status was virtually the same as the *coloni*. It might be added here that the extension of *patrocinium* to large parts of Italy, Spain and Gaul, where the aristocracy was in control of the countryside, deprived the Roman state of the revenues of these areas and further weakened its authority in the west. *Patrocinium* promoted the growth of localized centres of power governed by the aristocracy.

We thus see that by various processes a uniform class of *dependent peasant tenants tied to the soil* came existence in the western half of the Roman empire by the third century AD. All such peasants were referred to as *coloni* (whatever might have been their earlier status) and included those slaves whose status had improved when they were settled

on individual plots with their families. There was little to differentiate slaves of this type from the other *coloni*. The original *coloni* who had lost their freedom, the slaves whose status had been marginally improved when they became tenant cultivators, and depressed peasants (including those who had accepted *patrocinium*), became part of the broad status of *coloni* by the later Roman empire.

It was by extracting a large surplus from hitherto free cultivators that the landed aristocracy attempted to increase the volume of surplus extraction which had earlier declined due to the problems faced by slave-based production. The colonate, or the new type of production based on the *coloni*, became prevalent in the west by the fourth century AD. The crisis in the slave mode of production had led to the emergence of the colonate and the simultaneous decline of latifundia. The colonate represents a transitional phase between classical Greco-Roman slavery and classical medieval European feudalism. It should not however be thought that slavery completely disappeared in the later Roman empire. Slavery was very much there and latifundia still thrived in some areas. In the fifth century AD we have evidence of one latifundist owning 25,000 agricultural slaves who worked on estates located on the outskirts of Rome. Moreover, slaves continued to be employed for domestic work, in mining, and at the lowest levels of the government.

The crisis in the slave mode of production was accompanied by a more general crisis within the Roman economy. There were firstly the mounting military and bureaucratic costs of maintaining the empire. Such a vast empire could be protected at an enormous expense. The expansion of the empire over several centuries had yielded the resources required for maintaining a huge army. By the second century AD the possibilities of further expansion were exhausted. On the other hand after Marcus Aurelius the empire had to pursue a defensive policy with regard to the Germanic tribes. As the pressure of the Germanic tribes mounted, the protection of the empire became costlier. At the death of Augustus the Roman army had 250,000 regular

troops. Under Trajan the strength of the army had gone up to 300,000 and in the reign of Septimius Severus the army had 330,000 troops. As a result of the military reforms carried out by Diocletian at the end of the third century AD the number of regular troops rose to 450,000. Diocletian achieved this increase by reintroducing conscription. By the fourth century the strength of the Roman army stood at 650,000.

Military organization on such a gigantic scale necessitated heavy taxation by the state. Whereas Roman conquests during the late republic had allowed the state to exempt Roman citizens resident in Italy to do away with the *tributum*, the main agricultural tax, new taxes had been imposed in Italy and the provinces during the principate. Taxation steadily intensified and in the later empire the rate of taxation was three times higher than that prevailing at the end of the republic. Jones has called this high rate of taxation as 'over-taxation'. It is generally recognized that the heavy burden of state taxation was one of the factors which speeded up the decline of the Roman empire.

Diocletian's reign witnessed a steep rise in taxation. The collection of these taxes required a large administrative apparatus. To this we must add the need to have a huge centralized bureaucracy to govern the empire. Free grain distribution was also a big drain on the resources of the government. In the early principate cheap oil and wine rations had been added to free or subsidized wheat distributed by the state. Augustus, as we have noted, had increased the number of free grain recipients to 320,000. Thereafter the number was gradually stabilized at about 200,000. When the seat of government shifted to Constantinople free grain distribution was introduced here as well. In the later Roman empire 80,000 inhabitants of Constantinople benefitted from this free food distributed by the state.

Diocletian and Constantine had pursued a policy of more taxation and greater centralization in their attempt to overhaul the functioning of the Roman state. This policy succeeded in the east, but it accentuated the crisis in the

west. The western oligarchy passed on the increasing weight of state taxes to peasants/*coloni*, artisans, and petty-traders. This had an adverse effect on agricultural production, manufacture, and trade. The agrarian economy was the worst affected because it was the main source of revenue. The state tried to ensure that it received the full revenue demand by holding the tax collectors, called *decuriones* or *curiales*, responsible for its realization. The origins of this system went back to the early principate. In the principate the civic administration of urban centres was entrusted to municipal councils called *curia* (not to be confused with the *curia* of the *comitia curiata*). These were composed of the local elites and included wealthy landlords who had holdings in the neighbouring countryside but normally resided in the respective cities. The members of these municipal councils were designated as *decuriones* or *curiales*. Their functions included revenue collection.

With the passage of time the municipal councillors became a hereditary group and by the end of the principate hereditary municipal councillors were usually referred to as *curiales*. The *curiales* were simultaneously hereditary tax collectors. They were men with considerable local influence and possessed wealth derived mainly from land. Most of them were absentee landlords. The *curiales* collected imperial taxes from landowners, peasants, artisans and traders. They frequently attempted to escape their own tax liabilities by forcing the less privileged sections to pay illegal cesses. The *curiales* also tended to collude with other big landowners in helping them to avoid their share of tax payment. The *curiales* had to pledge their property to the Roman state against the taxes to be collected by them. This practice became prevalent in the third century AD. Diocletian strengthened the hold of the state over the *curiales* by tying them to their respective municipalities and introducing legal provisions which made it impossible for these hereditary tax collectors to get away from their responsibilities.

Jones has drawn attention to the fact that in the west the administrative machinery had traditionally been in the

hands of the aristocracy. Tax collection in this part of the empire was inefficient and the aristocracy had been lenient in taxing members of its own class. In the east the state relied mainly on the local gentry and 'men of middle class origin'. The state found it easier to exercise control over its officials in the east. Diocletian and his successors were more successful in tightening the system of taxation in the east as compared to the west. As the western oligarchy became more and more uncooperative, particularly due to its failure to determine the choice of emperors and the subsequent decline of the city of Rome in the administration of the empire, the collection of taxes in the west through *curiales* became an uphill task for the state. The oligarchy refused to pay taxes and even gave protection to the peasants against imperial tax collectors through the system of *patrocinium*. This accelerated the process of disintegration in the west. The landed aristocracy withdrew from urban centres and permanently settled down in their country houses making it even more difficult for the state to collect regular taxes from them.

Secondly, the government resorted to short-term solutions like debasement of coinage (reducing the weight of coins or adulterating them by diminishing the content of precious metal in them) to meet its growing financial commitments. In the long run such solutions undermined the entire economy. The silver *denarius* had been devalued by 15 per cent under Trajan. This meant that the silver content of the *denarius* was now 85 per cent of its face value. Marcus Aurelius further devalued the *denarius* by 6 per cent. By the mid-third century AD the *denarius* had been reduced to 5 per cent of the value it had at the beginning principate. Diocletian and Constantine did attempt to reform the currency but they were not very successful. It should be kept in mind that coinage of a high standard depended largely on a steady supply of precious metal. The supply of gold and silver had become more or less static by the end of the second century AD. Major conquests had come to an end and there were no discoveries of new mines or breakthroughs in mining technology within the empire.

Large-scale debasement of coinage resulted in an all-round increase in the prices of goods. During the last quarter of the third century AD there was a 1000% rise in overall price levels. All those who were in some way or the other involved in monetary exchanges felt the impact of this phenomenal price rise. Even the sections of society which were not engaged in monetary transactions suffered due to the ever-increasing exactions of the state which demanded more revenue to offset losses caused by inflation. The situation was particularly serious for those who received regular cash salaries. For the state it was a matter of worry that soldiers and government servants could no longer live on the salaries they received. It was not feasible to go on increasing the rate of taxation beyond a certain point. Diocletian experimented with state regulation of prices. In AD 302 the emperor issued an edict which fixed prices for nearly 900 commodities. This attempt was unsuccessful for the simple reason that the state had virtually no control over production and distribution. Eventually by the fourth century AD the government began paying salaries in kind in the form of rations of food and clothing. This development discouraged monetary exchange and reinforced the tendency towards local and regional self-sufficiency which was already visible by the end of the third century AD.

The monetary crisis was just one of the factors which contributed to the decline of trade in the later Roman empire. The decline of trade had been an ongoing process which was linked to the very nature of the Roman economy. When we speak of trade in the context of the Roman empire we should not forget that long distance trade was mainly in luxury goods. Agricultural produce and handicrafts were routinely sold in local markets (unless they happened to be high value goods like fine wines, delicate pottery, superior varieties of textiles etc.). Unfortunately our knowledge about the precise manner in which the surplus produce was converted into money or precious metal which could then be exchanged by the aristocracy for luxury goods is

inadequate. Not much is known about the mechanism by which the surplus produce was gathered and centralized in the hands of the big exploiters. The Roman social formation was highly exploitative and it has been estimated that the wealth of the senatorial oligarchy in the third century AD was nearly five times what it had been in the first century AD. Even as late as the fifth century AD one latifundist who owned estates located in Italy, Sicily, Spain, Britain and Africa had an annual income which when converted into precious metal amounted to about 750 kg of gold! Such fortunes allowed the oligarchy to enjoy an ostentatious lifestyle. The conspicuous consumption that they indulged in sustained long distance trade in luxury goods.

In the early principate the oligarchy was concentrated in the city of Rome or in the principal Italian towns. They were expected to regularly attend meetings of the senate and there were restrictions on their going beyond Italy and southern Gaul without the permission of the government. The big landowners were absentee landlords who resided in Rome or in prominent urban centres. Their wealth flowed into these cities. What is more, the Mediterranean was the geographical centre of the Roman economy and all major towns were located on or very close to the coastline. The unification of the Mediterranean under Roman rule and the establishment of *Pax Romana* had given a boost to long distance seaborne trade. A ship could cover the entire distance from one end of the Mediterranean to the other in twenty days. The cost of conveying goods by sea was significantly lower than transporting them over land. Transport charges for carrying goods from Alexandria to Rome by sea were twenty-five times *less* than covering the same distance by land (this can only be a rough estimate since there were several variables in calculating freight charges). The further away one moved from the Mediterranean the more expensive inland transport became.

The Romans did possess excellent and well-maintained highways which facilitated the administrative unification of their empire. The construction of these highways had

commenced in the late republic. The Via Appia which connected Rome to southern Italy was begun in 312 BC and the last stretch of this major highway was completed only in the time of the Gracchus brothers. Then there was the Via Aemilia which was the main highway to Cisalpine Gaul. Other important highways were the Via Domitia linking Italy to Spain and the Via Egnatia which ran from Rome to Damascus. In addition to these there were provincial roads which joined provincial capitals to outlying territories. Roman highways were primarily used for military and administrative purposes. Their role in promoting trade and commerce was negligible. The relative backwardness of road transport technology made overland transport commercially unviable. The Mediterranean was the great commercial highway of the empire.

Goods flowed in the direction of Rome as long as it remained the preeminent urban centre of the Roman world. In the republican period the port of Ostia situated at a distance of sixteen miles from Rome at the mouth of the Tiber was the port-town which served the capital. Ostia developed into a major port (Ostia was also a naval base), with traffic from all over the Mediterranean converging upon it. Towards the end of the republic the silting of the port necessitated a shift to a new harbour located two miles north of Ostia. The new harbour was named Portus. The prosperity of Ostia/Portus was directly linked to the status of Rome as the foremost centre of consumption in the Mediterranean.

What needs to be emphasized is the parasitic nature of the city of Rome. Apart from the imperial court, the oligarchy, government officials, and praetorian guards there was a large section of unproductive poor inhabitants who lived on free grain distribution. Rome was more of a centre of consumption than of production and the trade of Ostia was essentially a one-way traffic. The declining political and administrative importance of the city was immediately reflected in the displacement of all economic activity centred on the city. By the third century AD the aristocracy was no

longer interested in residing at Rome or in its vicinity and moved to estates in the countryside of Italy, Gaul and Spain. This speeded up the decentralization of economic activity and made the country seats of the oligarchy self-sufficient economic units. Once Rome and Ostia lost their key position, Mediterranean long distance trade which for centuries had been geared to fulfil the requirements of the capital gradually slowed down. This resulted in the decay of long distance trade, especially in the west.

A related development was the economic advance of the northern regions of western Europe (northern Spain and Gaul). Considering that these areas were located at a great distance from the southern coastline of Europe they had never been integrated with the economic activity of the Mediterranean sea. These northern areas had tended to be self-sufficient right from the beginning. Some of the garrison towns in the northern frontier settlements of the Rhine and Danube had become the nucleus of production and exchange to ensure a stable local supply of provisions. It was too expensive to send regular overland supplies to these areas from the south. Paris, Trier and Mainz were a few notable frontier towns which had grown out of military garrisons.

We can therefore see that trade and monetary exchange was not essential to the new type of economy which was developing in several parts of the empire. In any case, we must be careful not to overrate the importance of trade in the Roman economy even when the empire was at its peak. Exchange would have been localized in nature and except for the luxury sector we are really dealing with petty-commodity production (small value articles of everyday use). This was also true of most of the provincial urban centres which procured whatever they required from their neighbourhood, from a surrounding area lying on an average within a radius of thirty miles. It would be worthwhile to note that the big latifundia themselves had stimulated economic self-sufficiency, especially when they were situated at some distance from major centres of habitation. Almost everything that was needed by residents

of the latifundia was produced on the estate itself. When landowners permanently settled in the countryside, and in a situation where trade had declined, estates tended to become even more self-sufficient.

The self-sufficient village or estate inhabited by *coloni* who were subservient to a wealthy landowner with semi-independent authority in the countryside gradually became the typical pattern of Italy, Spain and Gaul. With the shift of the landed aristocracy to the countryside the centralized state became weaker in the west and ultimately collapsed. On the other hand small and medium peasants and the local middle class gentry maintained a strong presence in the east. Slave agriculture in the east never attained the dimensions that it did in the west. Consequently the crisis of the slave mode of production was not as acute in the east as it was in the west. The economy of the east remained relatively stable which enabled the restructured Roman state of the dominate to mobilize financial resources for its drive towards centralization in the eastern provinces. In the east the landed aristocracy was not powerful enough to obstruct the process of centralization.

Unlike in the west, the old urban centres of the east did not wither away. Since there were fewer cities in the west as compared to the east the process of ruralization of the economy in Italy, Spain and Gaul was very swift after the latifundists withdrew to the countryside. This did not happen in the east where towns and some amount of trade survived. The three biggest cities of the Roman empire were Rome, Alexandria and Antioch. Of these, two were situated in the east—Alexandria in Egypt and Antioch in Syria. Alexandria was perhaps the greatest port of the Greco-Roman world, surpassing even Ostia in terms of its economic importance. Both Alexandria and Antioch continued to prosper for long after the decline of Rome. To these two great cities of the east we may add Constantinople which rose to prominence in the fourth century AD. The economic crisis of the later Roman empire was much more pronounced in the west. This was the area where the

development of the slave mode of production had found its fullest expression. It is not surprising that the crisis in the slave mode of production was the most serious in Italy, Gaul and Spain. The final blow to the Roman empire came from the Germanic invasions. The collapse of the state in the west left the region militarily weak so that it quickly succumbed to the Germanic tribes. The east was able to resist these invasions and the eastern empire lasted several centuries after the end of the empire in the west.

II

The internal crisis of the Roman empire coincided with escalating pressure by barbarian tribes on the frontiers. Some of these tribes penetrated and took over several parts of the empire thereby completing the process of its downfall. For centuries northern and central Europe had been the home of diverse tribal groups. A significant proportion of these belonged to the large Indo-European linguistic family. The Roman conquest of Gaul and the Danubian region of central Europe had brought the empire face-to-face with these tribes. The Celtic tribes of northern Gaul and Britain were incorporated in the empire, although the subjugation of the Celts of northern Gaul and Belgium was a long drawn-out process. The eastern frontier of Rome in northern Europe was established at the river Rhine. The Rhine which rises in Switzerland, just north of the Alps, runs from south to north across the western extremity of modern Germany and flows into the North Sea. The Danube originates in southern Germany, within a short distance of the Rhine, and flows eastwards right through central Europe and discharges its waters into the Black Sea. The Rhine and Danube formed an L-shaped boundary of the Roman territories in northern and central Europe. Beyond the Rhine-Danube border, east of the Rhine and north of the Danube, lay the principal Germanic zone.

The Germanic peoples initially lived in southern Scandinavia and along the Baltic coast. From c. 1000 BC

onwards they began moving southwards and westwards. Many Germanic tribes like the Cimbri and the Teutones were settled near the Rhine when the Romans conquered northern Gaul. The vast undefined area to the east of the Rhine was referred to as Germania by the Romans. Roman writers sometimes used Teuton and German synonymously for all the tribes which dwelt in this area, although the Teutones were just one of the innumerable Germanic tribes. The Germanic tribes with whom the Romans first came into contact practised primitive agriculture and pastoralism. They were frequently on the move and were not attached to a particular territory. Land and cattle were owned collectively by the tribe. There was very little social differentiation within the tribes. The primitive economy of these tribes hardly produced any surplus and the produce was shared on a more or less equitable basis by all households which constituted the tribe. State formation had not yet taken place. The tribes had their chieftains who were chosen to lead the tribe in times of war. Hereditary chiefship was almost unknown.

The tribes inhabiting the margins of the empire were constant victims of raids carried out by the Romans to capture slaves. Some historians believe that Roman raids forced some of the Germanic tribes to organize themselves for warfare on a permanent basis and that this factor acted as a catalyst for state formation among the Germanic tribes. Moreover, the proximity of the Roman empire to the Germanic tribes had a profound impact upon the Germanic social formation. The tribes living close to the frontier traded with the Romans exchanging cattle, dairy products, and forest produce for Roman goods. Roman slave traders might have found a couple of collaborators among the tribes who helped them capture slaves and received payments in return. Lastly, the tribes, whenever they got an opportunity, raided outlying Roman settlements and the booty captured on these occasions increased the surplus available to the respective tribes. Gradually wealthy warrior chieftains and a class of professional warriors came into existence and

rudimentary states were formed. The more powerful chieftains subjugated neighbouring Germanic tribes or formed alliances with them thereby augmenting their strength. They could now support a large retinue of warriors for carrying out regular raids and to exploit members of their own tribes. These changes broke down the earlier social structure of the tribes and led to class differentiation and state formation.

Right since the time of Augustus the Romans had to contend with the problem of the Germanic tribes who occupied the land beyond the Rhine-Danube frontier. In the early principate the tribes were undergoing a transition to class society and were too weak and scattered to seriously confront the might of the Roman army. Things began to change around the middle of the second century AD. The pressure of the Germanic tribes in the Danube area increased mainly due to the onslaught of the Marcomanni. The Marcomanni had founded their own state along the middle Danube. Marcus Aurelius had a difficult time dealing with them. From his time onwards the empire embarked upon a defensive policy to deal with the Germanic problem. One of the strategies of Aurelius was to grant permission to Germanic cultivators to settle down within Roman territories. The Germanic tribes were no longer interested in raiding expeditions but wanted to acquire fertile agricultural land. The central European provinces were sparsely populated and Aurelius thought that if Germanic peasants were settled in this area it would solve the problem of labour and at the same time reduce the pressure on the frontier. The Germanic cultivators were legally free but they were assigned to specific landowners and tied to the soil. Each group was placed under the supervision of a Roman official.

The successors of Marcus Aurelius pursued similar policies, but at times they also launched major military expeditions to keep the Germanic tribes in check. By the end of second century AD the Danubian army was the largest in the empire. In the half-century of anarchy which followed the assassination of Severus Alexander in AD 235 the

Danubian contingents had a decisive say in the choice of the emperor. Incidentally, Severus Alexander had been killed by his soldiers due to a dispute with the Danubian troops over the question of fighting the Germanic tribes. The troops had been demanding a more aggressive policy which the emperor was reluctant to adopt. The attempt of the emperor to bargain for peace rather than fight the Germanic tribes provoked his murder. Germanic penetration of the Danubian frontier and occupation of agricultural lands created a tense situation in the frontier areas. The problem was of immediate concern to the Danubian troops which were often recruited from local peasant families. Diocletian and Constantine too came from this area.

In the first half of the third century AD two confederations of northern Germanic tribes, the Alamanni and the Franks, were the most formidable adversaries of the empire on the Rhine frontier. These two tribal groups made constant forays into (Saul. The Danubian frontier was threatened by another group known as the Goths. The Goths were among the latest arrivals in central and eastern Europe. They migrated from southern Scandinavia in the mid-second century AD. In the first quarter of the third century AD they began raiding the Danubian frontier and it was their invasion which had incited the troops to mutiny against Severus Alexander.

With time it became clear that the Roman empire did not have the military resources to protect its long European frontier against the Germanic tribes. A policy of compromise became inevitable. There were broadly three aspects of this policy: i) the Romans selectively allowed isolated Germanic groups to settle down inside the empire as cultivators; ii) the Roman army increasingly recruited Germanic soldiers; and iii) puppet Germanic chieftains who were loyal to Rome were established along the frontier to act as a buffer against the relatively more hostile tribes. It was, of course, necessary to fight back several tribes and the military option was not completely abandoned. Nevertheless, the Roman policy of compromise paved the way for peaceful Germanic

penetration of the empire. By the end of the third century AD there was a substantial Germanic population in the Danubian and Balkan provinces. In the Roman army too there was a strong Germanic presence. Constantine had gone in for large-scale recruitment of Germanic soldiers. His personal bodyguard mainly contained Germanic troops and several Germans were given leading positions in the army by him.

While the Roman empire did manage to gradually absorb a section of the Germanic tribes, it could not resist the steadily increasing pressure of some of the most aggressive tribes which had advanced to a stage where they required land for permanent settlement to develop a stable agrarian economy. These tribes were already militarily well-organized. Within a few decades after the death of Constantine (AD 337) there was a fresh wave of tribal movements in eastern Europe. For the Romans the immediate threat came from the Goths. In the first half of the third century AD the Roman army had repulsed the earliest Gothic invasions. During the course of their subsequent wanderings in Europe the Goths had split into two groups: the Visigoths (western Goths) who lived close to the Danubian frontier; and the Ostrogoths (eastern Goths) who lived further east in southern Russia.

Around the middle of the fourth century AD there was a series of tribal movements which had their origin in developments in Central Asia. These set in motion a chain reaction which had disastrous consequences for the Roman empire. The Central Asian grasslands which extend from southern Russia in the west to the Gobi desert in the east had for long been the homeland of numerous tribes which engaged in specialised nomadic pastoralism. This was a specific strategy to exploit the resources of this region. The nomadic tribes reared livestock on a large scale and had evolved a complex pattern of movement to support their animals. Perry Anderson has characterized nomadic pastoralism as a distinct mode of production 'with its own dynamic, limits and contradictions, that should not be

confused with those of either tribal or feudal agriculture'. This mode of production suited the semi-arid environment of Central Asia. It represented a higher level of development than primitive subsistence agriculture. The highly specialized strategy of nomadic pastoralism was a successful adaptation to the Central Asian terrain and was capable of producing a surplus. Livestock, rather than land, was the main form of wealth. Surplus production promoted class differentiation. Tribal chieftains presided over a relatively simple state apparatus which included warriors and heads of powerful clans.

The search for good pastures was an important consideration for these nomadic tribes. Given the comparatively poor soil of the region inhabited by them, they were always in need of extensive stretches of land to provide for their animals. The larger the tribe and the more successful it was at rearing its livestock the greater would be its pressure for pastures. This implied conflicts with neighbouring tribes who subsisted on nomadic pastoralism. The conflict might lead to subjugation of one tribe by another (and payment of tribute to the dominant tribe) or an alliance which would culminate in a powerful confederacy. However, nomadic societies had some serious drawbacks, as for instance complete lack of urbanization and low levels of technology, which made it difficult for them to progress to higher stages of historical development entirely on their own.

Nomadic pastoralists did not live in isolation but had intimate exchange relationships with the advanced agrarian societies on whose margins they dwelt. Meat, dairy produce, hides, wool, fur, cattle and horses were exchanged for diverse commodities which advanced agrarian economies could offer. Trade was combined with raiding expeditions into territories of settled societies. Both increased the disparities of wealth in the nomadic societies. It became possible for some of the tribal chiefs to maintain full-fledged professional armed contingents. The inbuilt mobility of the nomadic troops, their familiarity with difficult terrain, their simple needs and their special skills as horsemen and

archers often gave them a great advantage while conducting swift military campaigns. These developments produced a number of short-lived episodes in history in which some nomadic tribes succeeded in conquering large territories.

One such episode occurred in the fourth century AD when a confederacy of nomadic pastoralists called Huns expanded westwards from the Gobi desert and north China. The Huns moved across Central Asia and by c. AD 350 they had reached eastern Europe. Here they attacked and displaced the tribes inhabiting southern Russia. Of these tribes the Ostrogoths were among the most prominent. The Ostrogoths were forced to abandon their lands and had to move further west where they encountered the Visigoths. The combined pressure of the Huns and the Ostrogoths drove the Visigoths to the Roman border in eastern Europe. The Visigoths crossed the lower Danube and fought a fierce battle with the Roman army in AD 378 at Hadrianopolis (also called Adrianople, this city was named after the emperor Hadrian; it is now called Edirne and is situated in the European part of modern Turkey). The Visigoths were led by their chief Fritigern in this battle. The Roman army was routed in the battle and the reigning emperor, Valens, was killed while fighting. This was the first major military defeat inflicted by the Germanic tribes on the Romans. Gibbon regarded the battle of Hadrianopolis as a turning point in the history of the later Roman empire. The empire never recovered from this shock.

The battle of Hadrianopolis opened the way for further barbarian invasions. In AD 406 several Germanic tribes, which included the Vandals, the Suebi and the Alani, crossed the Rhine and began to occupy the western provinces of Rome. This date marks the beginning of the gradual takeover of the western empire by the Germanic tribes. Besides the Vandals, the Suebi and the Alani there were some other prominent tribes, namely, the Visigoths, the Ostrogoths and the Burgundians. After their victory at Hadrianopolis the Visigoths had plundered Greece and had then moved into Italy. In AD 410 the Visigothic chief Alaric

attacked Rome and looted the city for three days. This incident had a deep psychological impact on contemporaries. The prestige of the city of Rome, even after it had lost its political relevance, was such that it was not considered likely that it might actually be captured and plundered. From the fourth century AD onwards Rome was just a symbol of the Roman empire, but it was still a powerful symbol. Alaric's assault on the city had a demoralizing effect on the empire as a whole.

A permanent division of the empire had taken place following the battle of Hadrianopolis. Rival claimants to the throne now enlisted the support of Germanic chiefs to establish their authority in different parts of the empire. After AD 395 Arcadius was the emperor in the east with Constantinople as his capital. He was supported by Alaric. Honorius was the emperor in Rome and had the backing of the Vandal chief Stilicho. The Germanic chiefs strengthened their position in the empire by promoting the interests of opposing imperial candidates. In the fifth century AD it became normal to have two emperors, one in the east and the other in the west. Eventually the western Roman empire split up into a number of Germanic kingdoms.

Having sacked Rome, the Visigoths attempted to invade the province of Africa, but were unsuccessful. They then moved on to Gaul, and Spain-where an independent kingdom was founded in AD 475 by the Visigothic ruler Euric. In AD 507 the Visigoths were expelled from Gaul by another Germanic tribe, the Franks, but the Visigothic kingdom survived in Spain right till the Arab conquests of the eighth century AD. Meanwhile the Vandals had reached Africa and had captured Carthage in AD 439. The Vandal chief Genseric established a new Germanic kingdom in the Roman province of Africa. This was a catastrophe for Rome because Africa had been the principal supplier of grain to the city. The Vandal kingdom later extended to other parts of the western Mediterranean coastline of north Africa.

In the mid-fifth century AD there was a renewed and more vigorous invasion of eastern Europe by the Huns. By

this time the Huns had created a powerful monarchical state. The Hun ruler Attila created a vast empire in the first half of the fifth century AD. This empire extended from Asia to central and eastern Europe. For some time Attila extracted a tribute from the western Roman emperor. Attila invaded Italy and Gaul. The Visigoths and other Germanic tribes allied with Rome to push out the Huns. In AD 451 Attila was defeated by the combined Roman and Germanic armies. With the death of Attila in AD 453 the Hun empire collapsed. However Attila's invasions provided the Germanic tribes with yet another opportunity to tighten their hold over the Roman empire.

In AD 455 the Vandals invaded and plundered the city of Rome. Then in AD 476 the last Roman emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed. After this there was no emperor in the west. Only a remnant of the Roman empire survived in the east with its capital at Constantinople. This truncated empire is usually referred to as the Byzantine empire (or eastern Roman empire). The Byzantine empire claimed itself to be the legitimate successor of the original Roman empire. In a sense this is true because after the fifth century AD there was no such thing as a Roman empire in the west. But the nature of the Byzantine empire was very different from the Roman empire. A detailed discussion on the Byzantine empire falls outside the purview of this study. It will suffice to note that the Byzantine empire, which consisted of the eastern provinces of the Roman empire was politically and economically more stable. This enabled the Byzantine empire to endure for several centuries.

The Byzantine empire soon recovered from the upheaval caused by the Germanic invasions. It reannexed some of the Roman territories in north Africa. The Byzantine emperor Justinian I (AD 527-65) briefly unified the eastern and western provinces by conquering Italy. The Byzantines consolidated their position in West Asia but their eastward advance was checked by the Sassanids. The Byzantine empire inherited and preserved some of the attainments of Roman civilization. Particularly noteworthy is that it carried

forward the great tradition of Roman law. In fact it was the eastern emperors who took the lead in systematizing and codifying Roman law. The emperor Theodosius II compiled all the laws which had been framed since the time of Diocletian. Later, a comprehensive Code of Roman Law was prepared under Justinian. This was an elaborate exercise which required the sorting and classification of an enormous collection of Roman laws. It should be remembered that the edifice of Roman law had been built over several centuries, since the publication of the Twelve Tables in the early republic. Justinian entrusted this task to a sixteen-member board which summarized the laws, judgements, commentaries of jurists and imperial rulings which together are known as Justinian's Code. A simplified version of the Code was issued in a two-volume work which has come to be known as the *Digest*. This *Digest* helped to popularize Roman law in the Germanic states of the west. It was through Justinian's Code, as outlined in the *Digest*, that Roman legal concepts entered modern European jurisprudence. The impact of Justinian's Code on present-day legal systems can hardly be ignored.

In the western provinces of the empire various Germanic tribes had carved out their own kingdoms: the Visigoths in Spain; the Vandals in Africa; the Burgundians in southern Gaul; and the Ostrogoths in Italy. When the Visigoths had moved on to Spain the Ostrogoths occupied parts of eastern and central Europe. They posed a danger to the Roman empire in the east. The Byzantine empire encouraged them to conquer Italy and thereby relieve the Germanic pressure in the east. In AD 493 an Ostrogothic kingdom was founded in northern Italy. The Ostrogoths proclaimed their chief, Theodoric, as the ruler of this kingdom.

Several historians have pointed out that we should be careful not to exaggerate the damage caused by the Germanic states to Roman society. *The first phase* of Germanic occupation of the west which began in c. AD 406 did not eliminate Roman institutions or the Roman socio-economic structure. During the 1920s Alfons Dopsch put forth the

thesis (*Economic and Social Foundations of European Civilization*) that Germanic invasions did not represent a complete break with the past and that the Germanic states continued with the traditions of the Roman empire. He argued that the Germanic states assimilated and preserved Roman institutions at a time when the state had broken down in the west. The Germanic tribes therefore performed the historical task of nurturing the great achievements of Roman civilization. The Germanic societies adopted several features of Roman society which modified their own social structures.

It is difficult to accept Dopsch's contention in its entirety. Roman institutions did not remain undisturbed by Germanic invasions and were seriously undermined by them. The real value of Dopsch's work lies in its focus on the *continuities* between structures of the later Roman empire and the first Germanic states. Dopsch highlights the fact that the Germanic invasions transformed Germanic societies themselves more than Roman society. The Germanic tribes were at a much lower level of development than societies in the Roman territories which they conquered. They lacked the infrastructure to govern the highly sophisticated Roman empire. Consequently they took over the preexisting political and economic framework. This wholesale borrowing by the Germanic states perpetuated the social formation of the later empire.

The economic trends of the third and fourth centuries AD persisted in the fifth century AD. The only major change was that a Germanic landed aristocracy appeared in the countryside. The Ostrogoths, the Visigoths and the Burgundians introduced the system of *hospitalitas* through which Germanic landowners found a place in the rural economy. *Hospitalitas* was a system by which Roman landowners were forced to extend 'hospitality' to Germanic warrior chiefs and clan leaders. This implied that the Roman landowners had to share their estates with the Germanic tribes. The estates were divided according to the proportion laid down by the Germanic rulers. In Visigothic Spain the landowners had to give two-thirds of the cultivated land to

the Germanic leaders. In the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy the Roman landed aristocracy had to hand over one-third of the respective estates to the Germans. This division pertained to individual estates and did not entail a division of the entire cultivable land. On the whole the overall agricultural land affected by *hospitalitas* was never very large. Only the biggest estates were broken up in this way.

A given Germanic tribe usually did not exceed 100,000 members on an average. The scale on which the Germanic tribes took over land under the *hospitalitas* system was therefore not big enough to cause a serious dislocation of the economy. Nor did it significantly change the pattern of landownership. Social differentiation among the tribes ensured that only the more influential members were able to acquire land in this manner. The less privileged members of the tribes were settled as cultivators on the holdings of the tribal leaders. With time the Germanic cultivators were reduced to the status of *coloni*. The Germanic landowners imitated the lifestyles of the Roman provincial aristocracy and became socially indistinguishable from it.

The process of depressing the status of the independent Germanic peasants was facilitated by the presence of Roman *coloni* and serfs on the portions of the estates taken away by the Germans. When transfer of land took place it included the *coloni* who were attached to it. It may be recalled that since the fourth century AD Roman *coloni* were legally tied to the soil. Further, the *hospitalitas* system also involved the sharing of slaves between the Roman and Germanic landowners (e.g. half the total number of agricultural slaves had to be given to the Germanic leaders in the Burgundian state). The basic system of production was unaltered. The colonate and slave-based agriculture remained the dominant features of the rural economy in Italy, Spain and Gaul. In the Vandal state of Africa the situation was somewhat different. Here the Vandals completely eliminated the Roman landed aristocracy and took over all their holdings. Of all the Germanic ruling classes the Vandal ruling class is considered to be the most ruthlessly exploitative.

The administrative and judicial apparatus evolved by the states formed during the first phase of Germanic invasions was marked by dualism, i.e. a sort of dual system of government emerged. The existing Roman structure was not dismantled. In towns and generally at the local level Roman administrative bodies looked after day-to-day governance. The groups which had controlled these bodies prior to the Germanic conquests retained much of their authority. Roman laws remained in force, especially for the Roman populace. The Germanic settlers were governed by their own laws and customs. Roman law influenced and modified Germanic laws, and laws relating to matters like private property were copied without too many changes. There was nevertheless a sharp division between the civil and military administration. The army was fully under Germanic control. The dualism of the Germanic states allowed Roman institutions to flourish for some time even after the Roman empire had come to an end in the west. A second phase of Germanic invasions destroyed this dualism and had a more devastating effect on the Roman social structure. It was in this second phase that the foundations of classical European feudalism were laid.

Chapter Eleven

THE ARABS, ISLAM, AND THE EARLY ABBASID CALIPHATE

AT the beginning of the seventh century (hereafter all dates are AD, unless otherwise specified) an event of great historical significance took place in the Arabian peninsula (roughly corresponding to modern Saudi Arabia). We have scarcely referred to this region so far because the people who inhabited it lived an isolated existence, away from the settled societies of West Asia. Except for the fertile mountain valleys of Yemen in the south-west and Oman in the southeast the entire peninsula is a sparsely populated arid zone. Nomadic tribal communities, who are generally called 'beduin', lived in this inhospitable land. In the seventh century Arabia became the centre of a new religious movement—Islam.

I

Arabia is a peninsula of large dimensions. It is surrounded by the Red Sea in the west, the Arabian Sea in the south and the Persian Gulf in the east. Most of the peninsula is either desert or dry grassland (steppe). Very little regular rainfall takes place in the area. Periods of drought extending up to three years are quite common. Some parts of the peninsula may go without rainfall for as many as ten years at a stretch. Rains are more frequent in the coastal areas than in the interior. Brief spells of rainfall occur mainly in winter and

spring. There are no permanent rivers in Arabia. However, the land is dotted with a number of oases formed by springs or wells.

At the heart of the peninsula lies a vast unbroken arid zone called Najd. In the north Najd merges with the Syrian desert or Nafud. In the north-east Najd extends almost to the banks of the Euphrates in southern Iraq. In the west, the strip of land which runs parallel to the Red Sea consists of several low hills. The central part of western Arabia is called Hijaz. Mecca and Madina, where early Islam was born, are situated in Hijaz. The hills and rocks of Hijaz are barren and the entire area is arid. Yemen (South Arabia), which, lies in the south-western corner of the peninsula, contains mountains and fertile valleys. The environment of Yemen differs sharply from that of the rest of Arabia because it receives monsoon rains. South-eastern Arabia, known as Oman, is also relatively less arid than Najd and Hijaz. Lying at the entrance to the Persian Gulf, Oman was a somewhat remote area at the periphery of Arabia and was socially and economically integrated with the rest of the peninsula comparatively late.

For centuries the inhabitants of central, northern and western Arabia had led a nomadic existence. The domestication and introduction of the camel (sometime after c. 2000 BC) had facilitated the evolution of specialized pastoral nomadism based on camel-rearing. Camels can travel continuously for three weeks with almost no food or water in temperatures as high as 50 °C. They could be used to explore and exploit the scarce resources of the Arabian desert. The oases offered pastures for the animals and served as watering places. Dates, fruits and some grain could be grown in the oases utilizing natural springs or by digging wells. Date and camel's milk was the staple diet of the region. The camel pastoralists, known as beduin (from *bdu* or nomad), moved from oasis to oasis with their animals and over a period of time acquired an intimate knowledge of the harsh environment. This familiarity with the difficult terrain of Najd and Hijaz was crucial to their strategy of survival.

The beduin knew exactly where they could find some subsistence for themselves and their animals (mainly camels, but occasionally a few horses), and for how long they could stay in a particular place.

The beduin were constantly on the move. Their social organization was based on the independent tribe (*qabila*), each tribe recognizing a common ancestor (real or imaginary). Beduin tribes were usually units of small size and were divided into clans or extended families. As clans grew larger they moved away to form independent units of their own. This prevented the tribes from becoming too unwieldy. The arid environment just could not support large concentrations of population. The beduin lifestyle became typical of Arabia. There were very few communities which led a settled existence. In some places where the rainfall was more regular or where the springs and wells provided sufficient water for irrigation, especially in Hijaz, there were limited possibilities for cultivating grain together with date-palms, fruits and vegetables. Such settlements were often targets of beduin raids. The beduin combined pastoralism with raids against neighbouring beduin tribes and settled communities to augment their resources. A form of tribute, called *khuwwa*, might also be realized by the beduin from the agriculturists in return for protection and an assurance to desist from plunder.

In this way the camel pastoralists exercised a degree of control over the settled people. They were certainly the most prominent inhabitants of the region. Camel nomadic pastoralism was the dominant feature of the pre-Islamic social formation of Arabia. There were at the same time inferior pastoralists who reared sheep and goats. On the other hand there were some communities which subsisted on cultivation of dates, fruit and grain. Finally, all groups were involved in some amount of exchange and trade. As we shall see, a class of specialist merchants had come into existence by the sixth century. It should be borne in mind that at this time there were no urban centres in Arabia proper and no state formation had taken place.

The beduin tribes and the people of the peninsula as a whole referred to themselves generally as *arah*. The ancient Greeks had used the term *Sarakenoi* (Latin *Saraceni*, English *Saracens*) to designate them. Till very recently *Saracen* and *Arab* were used synonymously in western literature. The language spoken by them was a form of Semitic which was a variation of Aramaic. Although there were different dialects, a distinctive Arabic linguistic identity had been formed by the end of the fifth century. The most outstanding expression of this was the growth of a tradition of oral poetry. From c. 500 onwards poems were being composed in Arabic (there is no record for the earlier period) in a specific form known as *rajaz*. There were several poets who composed in this form, usually extempore. Each tribe had its own poets who entertained their audience by narrating tales of the glory of the tribe. The *rajaz* form was followed by a highly evolved type of poetry called *aasida* or ode. These poems were of some length and could be sung. A particular variety of the *qasida* acquired great fame throughout Arabia. These were odes called—for some obscure reason—'suspended poems' or *muallaqat*. The earliest and the most well-known of the 'suspended poems' are those composed by Imrul Qays who is regarded as the foremost pre-Islamic poet of Arabia. Tarafa, Zuhayr and Labid were among the other poets who wrote *muallaqat*. These poems were recited far and wide thereby giving the language a certain uniformity. The possession of a common language contributed towards giving the dispersed Arab tribes some cultural unity even though they lacked state structures or political cohesion. Patricia Crone has commented on the remarkable 'cultural homogeneity' of the Arab tribes during the sixth century.

It would be wrong to assume that the Arabs lived in complete isolation from the outside world. There were several points of contact in the north (with Syria and Palestine); in the north-east (with Iraq); in the south (with Yemen); and across the Red Sea (with Ethiopia). Syria, Palestine, Iraq, and to a lesser extent Yemen, were settled

societies. In the sixth century Syria and Palestine were part of the Byzantine empire {successor to the Roman empire in the east). Iraq was ruled by the Sassanids whose capital Ctesiphon was situated on the Tigris in southern Iraq, not very far from the edge of the Arabian desert. Yemen was a settled tract with an agrarian economy which yielded a sufficient surplus to activate state formation. Agriculture in Yemen was supplemented by trade.

By the beginning of the fifth century a few urban centres had come up in Yemen. The area was ruled by independent chiefs who had carved out small states. In the middle of the fifth century Yemen was unified by Abkarib Asad who also managed to extract tribute from some beduin tribes. A number of southern beduin tribes had at this time come together in a confederacy led by the Kinda tribe. The chiefs of Kinda were allied to the ruler of Yemen to whom they paid tribute. Yemen was inhabited by people whose language was closely related to, but quite distinct from, Arabic. In the fifth century a sizeable section of the Yemeni population practiced Judaism. There had been a Jewish presence in Hijaz and Yemen since the first century. Asad himself had converted to Judaism. Yemen also had a small Christian community.

Throughout the latter half of the sixth century (from c. 540) the Byzantine and Sassanid empires were engaged in a bitter conflict for the control of Syria and Palestine. Syria, it may be recalled, had been a part of the Roman empire for a long time. The Sassanids had consolidated their position in northern Mesopotamia and were trying to dislodge the Byzantines from Syria. In the course of their struggle for supremacy in West Asia the Byzantines and Sassanids had extended their control to parts of the Arabian peninsula. This they did indirectly by entering into unequal alliances with some tribal groups which were willing to accept Byzantine or Sassanid overlordship. It might be mentioned here that several Arabs had gradually penetrated Syria and Iraq and had enlisted in Byzantine or Sassanid armies. In the fifth century one beduin clan, the Banu Lakhm, had

established a state on the borders of the Sassanid empire in north-east Arabia. The Lakhmid state was subject to the Sassanids. The capital of this state was Hira on the lower Euphrates. At the turn of the sixth century a nomadic Arab clan from Jordan, the Ghassan, had created a state on the outskirts of Syria. The Ghassanids owed their allegiance to the Byzantine empire. The Sassanids and the Byzantines used the Lakhmids and the Ghassanids, respectively, as a buffer against beduin incursions and for recruiting Arab troops.

On the shore of the Red Sea opposite the Arabian peninsula is the East African country of Ethiopia. Ethiopia was a monarchical state with its capital at Axum. The Ethiopian kings had converted to Christianity in the fourth century. In the sixth century the dominant religion of Ethiopia was Christianity. The Ethiopians had adopted a version of Christianity known as Coptic, the Coptic Church having descended directly from early Egyptian Christianity. Ethiopia was a close ally of the Byzantine empire and was used by the Byzantines to maintain their sphere of influence in Arabia, especially in Yemen. When in c. 510 a Jewish ruler named Dhu Nuwas came to power in South Arabia and began persecuting Christians, the Ethiopians used this as a pretext to invade Yemen. They were initially unsuccessful but eventually defeated Dhu Nuwas in 525. The supporters of Dhu Nuwas sought the help of the Persians to end Ethiopian and Byzantine predominance over South Arabia. By c. 570 Sassanid influence had become paramount in Yemen. The Arabs had thus been drawn into big power politics of the region in various ways.

During the sixth century a slow and gradual change was taking place within Arabia. Some of the tribes took to trade as their main occupation and gave up nomadic pastoralism. The shift to trade was most pronounced in Hijaz. Arabian trade received an impetus with the dislocation of the international route passing through the Persian Gulf and Iraq, caused by the Sassanid-Byzantine conflict. Some of the trade was now diverted through the Red Sea or went

overland from Yemen to Syria. There were already exchange relationships between Yemen and Syria-Palestine. Caravans went via Hijaz where a number of oases could be found on the way. Yemen now became an important transit point in the international trade. As a result the Hijaz route acquired greater significance. For the tribes or clans which had adopted trade as their primary occupation this was an excellent opportunity. They provided camels for carrying goods or organized caravans on their own account. It was necessary to arrange for protection against beduin raids, for which purpose alliances had to be made with neighbouring tribes. Despite the growth of trade in Hijaz, at least five-sixths of the population of this area was still nomadic in the sixth century.

It is in this historical situation that Mecca, a settlement of traders in Hijaz, rose to prominence in the sixth century. The settlement was located at an oasis and had a well, known as the Zamzam, the water of which came to be regarded as holy by the Muslims. Mecca was strategically placed at the junction of two trade routes: the route running from north to south linking Palestine with Yemen; and the somewhat less important route connecting Ethiopia and the Red Sea in the west with the Persian Gulf in the east. Mecca derived some of its importance from being a place of pilgrimage, a feature which the trading community of the settlement might have tried to promote to strengthen its position. The main shrine at Mecca was a rectangular structure called Kaba (cube). The Kaba contained idols and other objects venerated by various tribes and clans. These sacred objects included a black stone which was built into the wall of the shrine. Every year there was a specific sacred period when pilgrims visited the shrine. During this sacred period, which took on the shape of a fair, no violent acts of revenge were permissible and hostilities among conflicting tribes were suspended. Business transactions could take place peacefully at the fair. Similar fairs were held in some other neighbouring settlements, as for instance at Ukaz where there was an annual fair lasting twenty days.

Sometime towards the end of the fifth century Mecca came under the control of a person named Qusayy who belonged to the Quraysh tribe. This tribe consisted of numerous clans which were engaged in trade. The Quraysh soon became the leading tribe of the settlement. They entered into alliances with some neighbouring tribes like the Thaqif. The Thaqif were the dominant tribe in the settlement of Taif situated close to Mecca. Taif was a fertile oasis where fruits and grain were cultivated. Speaking of the ascendancy of the Quraysh, Maxime Rodinson, in his biography of Muhammad, has remarked that 'the history of the ensuing five hundred years may be seen in the light of the expansion of this one tribe to the dimensions of a world power'.

Mercantile activity was the mainstay of the Meccan economy since there were hardly any possibilities for agriculture. The proceeds from trade seem to have been large enough to support the inhabitants of the settlement. Camels, sheep and goats were also reared, although this was a secondary activity. Dates were cultivated to supplement the diet. The surplus accruing from trade had begun to undermine tribal solidarity by the sixth century. Initially the Quraysh were split into two broad divisions, those who lived on the outskirts (Quraysh az-Zawahir) and the more privileged who dwelt in the heart of the settlement close to the Zamzam well (Quraysh az-Bataih). A few families and clans became prosperous through trade and this led to a process of social differentiation. Class distinctions began to appear among the Quraysh. The adoption of a sedentary lifestyle had necessitated some elementary structures of authority to contain conflicts. Clan councils formed by heads of families were the basis of political organization. Tensions and conflicts generated by the breakdown of tribal society gave rise to a group with limited political authority. At the end of the sixth century and the beginning of the seventh century there were intense factional conflicts within this group. The factions were divided along clan lines and their disputes were partly for gaining a larger share of the trade of Mecca. It was in this historical situation that Muhammad

began preaching his religious message in the opening decades of the seventh century.

II

Our information about the early life of Muhammad is quite sketchy. The first accounts of his life which have come down to us were written more than a century after his death. The generally agreed date for his birth is c. 570. He belonged to the Hashim clan of the Quraysh tribe. Muhammad's father, Abudllah, was a person of limited means. Muhammad lost both his parents when he was still very small. He was brought up under the care of his paternal uncle, Abu Talib. Abu Talib was a fairly well-to-do merchant. When Muhammad grew up he found employment with a rich widow named Khadija. Khadija was a successful businesswoman who traded with Syria and Palestine. Muhammad assisted her with her enterprise. Subsequently Muhammad married Khadija. He was about twenty-five years old at the time of his marriage while Khadija was much older.

In c. 610 Muhammad had an intense spiritual experience which is supposed to mark the beginning of his Prophethood. A series of revelations, believed to be divinely inspired, were made to him. These became the basis of Muhammad's religious mission. He said that he was the messenger, or Prophet, of the Supreme Being—Allah. Allah's message was being communicated to human beings through Muhammad. These revelations form the Quran, the religious book of the Muslims. Khadija was among the first to believe in Muhammad's Prophethood. Within a few years Muhammad had a small group of Meccan followers who had accepted his religious ideas. They came to be known as *muslim* (plural *muslimun*), i.e. those who had submitted (to Allah). The religion itself was denoted by the term Islam, implying submission, derived from the same root as the word *muslim*.

The overriding principle of Muhammad's religion was uncompromising monotheism. He taught that there was

only one God, namely Allah. All other deities were rejected. One had to believe exclusively in Allah and not accept any other gods and goddesses whatsoever. The worship of idols was firmly prohibited. Muhammad sought to replace the diverse religious practices of Arab tribes by a single belief, making it the ideological basis of tribal unity. There was a strong emphasis on the unity and equality of all those who had accepted Allah and the Prophet.

Muhammad's faith differed sharply from the religious practices of the Meccans. He met with stiff opposition since he had denounced their traditional beliefs. For a few years he was able to preach his ideas at Mecca due to the protection he got from his influential uncle, Abu Talib. However, the death of Abu Talib, as well as of Khadija (who was an important source of strength to the Prophet), in the same year—619—made things difficult for him in Mecca. The situation became more and more unfavourable and eventually Muhammad decided to shift from Mecca to another Hijaz settlement, Yathrib, which was about 200 miles north of Mecca. Yathrib later acquired the name Madina (Madina literally means 'the city'). Muhammad and his followers emigrated to Madina in 622. This emigration from Mecca to Madina is referred to in Arabic as *hijrat*. Subsequently the beginning of the Islamic era was reckoned from this year.

Madina was a cluster of small villages inhabited by different tribes. These villages had come up around an oasis containing springs and wells with an abundant supply of water. This was more of a peasant settlement since it was possible to cultivate fruits and cereals here. A transition from nomadism to settled agriculture was taking place in Madina. Unlike Mecca, where the Quraysh were the dominant tribe, there were various tribes in Madina many of which were contending for control over the settlement. Some of the tribes were Jewish. Muhammad had been assured of support by the Madinese. He soon acquired some authority at Madina when he emerged as an arbitrator in tribal disputes. This helped him to spread his message and

he now had a number of Madinese followers. The earliest Meccan converts who had accompanied the Prophet to Madina were known as the *muhajirun* ('emigrants')/ while the Madinese supporters were called *ansar* ('helpers'). These divisions played a role in later political disputes.

Muhammad laid the foundations of a new political structure in Madina. He was no longer just a religious leader, but the head of a nascent state centred on Madina. He was looked upon as lawgiver and began to lay down rules for governance. His followers (the male adults among them) constituted his armed force. Alliances were made with some of the tribes of adjacent areas. Several tribes embraced the new religion, thereby becoming part of the Muslim religious community (*umnia*) as well as of Muhammad's unified polity. Raids were still an indispensable source of income for this state. A formula for equitable distribution of the booty was worked out. One-fifth of the booty went directly to the Prophet so that the state was provided with independent finances. In addition, regular voluntary contributions were levied on tribes which accepted Muhammad's leadership. This developed into a tax called *zakat* which all Muslims had to pay to the state. *Zakat* was intended to be redistributed, mainly to the less privileged sections of the Muslims.

Once the framework of an administrative system and an army had been created, and ties had been forged with beduin tribes, Muhammad was in a position to carry on an armed struggle against the Quraysh of Mecca. As a matter of fact the two processes went hand in hand. Caravans going north from Mecca towards Syria and Palestine had to pass close to Madina. Quraysh trading caravans traversing this route were frequently attacked. The successful raids against Quraysh caravans eventually disrupted Meccan trade. The Quraysh had to sue for peace and in 630 Muhammad was able to occupy Mecca. The Meccans accepted Islam *en masse*. With the support of the powerful Quraysh tribe (and their allies such as the Thaqif of Taif who had also joined the fold), Muhammad rapidly consolidated his authority in

Arabia. The Kaba in Mecca became the most sacred sanctuary of Islam. All tribal idols and other objects of worship were removed from Kaba. The Islamic symbol which was located in Kaba was a black stone traditionally associated with Abraham. Abraham was regarded as the common ancestor of all the Arabs. Muslims were enjoined to always pray in the direction of Kaba and the pilgrimage to Kaba (*hajj*) was established as the preeminent religious ritual of the faith.

Muhammad passed away in 632. He had managed to replace tribal organization with a state which encompassed a large number of Arab tribes. At the time of Muhammad's death the overwhelming majority of beduin tribes (especially in Hijaz and Najd) had acknowledged his leadership. Initially the state was not territorially well-defined. This is hardly surprising since this was a state which essentially comprised nomadic tribes. Madina, and to a lesser extent Mecca, were the focal points of the government. However the extensive military potential of this state may be gauged from the fact that when Muhammad led an expedition in the direction of Syria shortly before his death his army consisted of 30,000 troops. It was in the half-century after 632 that the Arab state was given a concrete shape.

The work of W. M. Watt helps us to understand why Islam gained such wide acceptance among Arab tribes in such a short space of time. Watt has examined the nature of Arab society on the eve of the this new religious movement (*Muhammad at Mecca; Islam and the Integration of Society*). He sees the rise of Islam as a response to the transformation which was taking place due to trade and the adoption of a sedentary lifestyle by some tribes. It was at Mecca that the most striking changes occurred. The expansion of Meccan commerce eroded traditional ties and introduced tensions in society. The wealth which profits from trade, or earnings from pilgrims, brought into Mecca did not benefit everyone uniformly. This led to conflicts at various levels. The relatively simple tribal organization of the Quraysh did not

have any mechanism to cope with the new situation. Similar processes were at work elsewhere too, especially among tribes which had been drawn into the network of commercial exchanges. Many of these tribes had become a part of the Meccan system. Moreover, there were tribes which were taking up agriculture on a limited scale while others were coming within the orbit of settled societies on the periphery of Arabia (Byzantine and Persian empires; Ethiopia; Yemen). Muhammad's message of unity was an answer to this social ferment and Islam provided the tribes with a scheme for state formation.

Watt's explanation has profoundly influenced writings on the subject from the late 1950s onwards. Scholars like Rodinson (*Mohammed*) and Marshall Hodgson (*The Venture of Islam*) have accepted, and further elaborated, Watt's hypothesis. On the other hand some historians, as for instance Patricia Crone, are of the opinion that Watt's 'Meccan trade hypothesis' is unsatisfactory. Crone has put forward an alternative view in her *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Crone has tried to demonstrate that Meccan trade was not on a scale large enough to undermine traditional society. The trade was essentially in commodities of small value and was incapable of generating much wealth. The surplus yielded by the mercantile economy was not so big as to result in wide disparities in society. In other words, the traditional way of life was still intact. According to Crone the evidence indicates that the traditional way of life 'functioned too well'. The Meccans were initially opposed to Islam 'because they preferred their traditional way of life'. Further, for the beduin tribes raids and plunder were a useful way of augmenting their scanty resources. The new faith appealed to them as it helped to 'legitimize conquest'. What was offered to the tribes was a programme of state formation through unification and conquest. In more general terms Crone characterizes early Islam as a 'nativist movement', i.e. a movement born out of a deep attachment to the Arabian way of life in opposition to the penetration of foreign influences. The foreign influences are identified by

her as those values which were introduced by Byzantine and Persian attempts to dominate Arabia. Nevertheless, Crone does agree with Watt's view that the sedentarization which was taking place in some parts of Arabia had necessitated the growth of state structures at the expense of tribal ties.

III

Muhammad's death created a political vacuum. He had taught that he was the last of a long line of prophets sent by God to show the right path to humanity. This line included the prophets of Judaism and Christianity (Moses, Jesus, etc.)- It was held that there would be no further prophets after Muhammad. He was, however, not only Prophet but also the religious leader of the Muslims and head of the newly founded Arab state. His teachings, which were supposed to be the word of Allah, comprised the Quran and were to guide his followers in all aspects of life. There was no question of anyone assuming his position as Prophet, but someone had to take physical charge of the state and guide the religious community. As no specific rules had been laid down for this purpose, there was considerable scope for a dispute on this point. The question of who should have religious and political authority after Muhammad was to become increasingly contentious with the passage of time, leading to fierce conflicts which were to divide the believers and often involved serious doctrinal differences between different groups.

Broadly speaking there were three groups which claimed the right to succeed. There were, firstly, the Meccan *muhajirun* or 'emigrants', who were the earliest followers of Muhammad, and the *ansar* or Madinese 'helpers' who had given critical support to the cause after the *hijrat* of 622. They felt that the prerogative of succession belonged to them as they had been the first to accept Islam and had stood by Muhammad during the most difficult phase of his career. The second group, which is labelled as that of the 'legitimists' (or Alids), argued that succession should take

place within the family of Muhammad. Since the Prophet had no surviving direct male heir, this implied that Muhammad's paternal cousin, Ali, should succeed. Ali was the son of Muhammad's uncle Abu Talib and was married to Fatima, one of the daughters of Muhammad and Khadija. An additional qualification of Ali was that he was one of the *muhajirun*. Finally, there were the aristocracy of the Quraysh, particularly the Umayyads. We have already noted that Muhammad belonged to the Hashim clan of the Quraysh. In the early seventh century this was not the leading clan of the tribe. The most powerful clan was that of the Umayya (Abdul Muttalib, the grandfather of Muhammad was a first cousin of Umayya). They had converted very late but wielded enormous political influence.

At times there were overlapping loyalties, as well as internal divisions within these groups. For instance, the *muhajirun*, who were all Meccans, had clan and family ties with the Quraysh. On occasions when the *muhajirun* aligned with members of their own tribe the Madinese *ansar* complained that they were giving priority to tribal over religious ties. By and large political authority passed into the hands of the leading Quraysh families after 632. The immediate successors of Muhammad were his close companions. AH also become one of the successors, though at a later date. Subsequently it was the Umayyads and Hashimites who monopolized power.

Upon the death of Muhammad one of his seniormost companions, Abu Bakr, was chosen successor or *khalifa*. *Khalifa* literally means successor, which here implied 'successor of Muhammad'. For the next few centuries *khalifa* became the main title for the religious leader of the Muslims and the head of the state founded by Muhammad. 'Caliph' is the anglicized form of the word *khalifa* (and it is this form which we will use more frequently in our discussion). Early Islamic literature used the titles *khalifa* and *imam* synonymously, though the term *imam* was used more in the sense of religious leadership. In a more restricted sense the word *imam* denoted anyone who led the community in

prayer. The title *imam* was also applied to leaders of sects which grew up within Islam.

The succession of Abu Bakr as the first caliph (632-34) was fairly smooth. Abu Bakr was widely respected as being one of the closest aides of the Prophet. He was also the father-in-law of Muhammad (Muhammad had married Abu Bakr's daughter Aisha after the death of Khadija). When Abu Bakr took over, the newly formed state was in danger of disintegration as many of the beduin tribes broke away from Madina. For the nomadic people of Arabia the idea of being a permanent part of a state was quite new. They were not accustomed to such formal institutions. Rather they felt that they owed personal allegiance to Muhammad whom they recognized as their religious leader. The alliances with the tribes were still quite fragile and this gave an opportunity to some of the powerful tribal leaders to assert their independence. The situation became even more serious from the point of view of the young Islamic state as a few tribal religious leaders declared themselves to be prophets. One of these was Maslamah (Musaylimah) of the Hanifa tribe of central Arabia. Maslamah managed to gather a large following. The Muslims of Mecca and Madina denounced these leaders as 'false prophets'. Abu Bakr had to wage a series of campaigns to reestablish control over these tribes. These campaigns are called 'wars of the *ridda*' (*ridda* means apostasy or defection from one's religious allegiance).

Abu Bakr died within two years of his becoming caliph (634). He was succeeded by Umar, whom he had nominated as his successor. Umar was caliph from 634 to 644. He had also been one of the earliest Meccan followers of Muhammad. Umar was the real builder of the Arab empire. The unification of Arabia was completed under him and large-scale territorial expansion outside Arabia commenced. The Arabs conquered Iraq, Syria, Palestine and Egypt. Arab conquests in West Asia were at the expense of the Sassanid and Byzantine empires.

For over eighty years, prior to the rise of Islam, the Sassanid and Byzantine empires had been involved in a

fierce combat for supremacy over West Asia. Syria and northern Mesopotamia were the main theatres of the wars between the two empires. At the beginning of the seventh century the Persians gained an upper hand in this ongoing conflict. Their armies marched across Syria into Palestine and occupied Jerusalem in 615. The Persian army then moved into Egypt (619) and even threatened Constantinople (626). Internal problems of the Sassanids prevented them from consolidating their victories. Further, the Byzantine emperor Heraclius reorganized his army and launched a counter-offensive against the Persians. The Persians were pushed back and the Byzantine empire regained control over its territories in West Asia.

In the long run this conflict weakened the two empires. When the Arabs embarked upon their two-pronged invasion of Byzantine and Sassanid territories in 633-4, these two West Asian powers were so exhausted militarily that they were unable to put up any meaningful resistance. It took the Arabs just a couple of years to take Iraq from the Sassanids and to oust the Byzantines from Syria, Palestine and Egypt. In 633 the Arabs began making preliminary forays into Sassanid territories along the lower Euphrates on the north-eastern frontier of Arabia. The Lakhmid capital of Hira was besieged and taken. In 636 the Persian army was routed at the battle of Qadisiya. In the following year Arab forces led by one of their leading commanders, Saad, captured the Sassanid capital Ctesiphon (called Madain by the Arabs). With this, Sassanid rule came to an end in Iraq. Saad was appointed the military and civil head of Iraq. In Syria the town of Damascus was first attacked in 634 and taken in 635. The fall of Damascus paved the way for the annexation of Syria and Palestine. Apart from Saad, Khalid bin Walid was another prominent military commander of the Arabs. Khalid played a major role in the campaigns in Iraq and Syria. In 639 Egypt was invaded and within a year almost the entire country was occupied. Alexandria was captured in 642, thereby completing the conquest of Egypt. In the east, Arab troops began penetrating Iran proper from 642. The

Sassanids had retreated beyond the Zagros mountains after the loss of Iraq. In 642 itself the main Sassanid army was destroyed at the battle of Nehawand in Iran. By c. 650 the Arabs had taken over most of Iran, including the northeastern region of Khurasan. The last Sassanid ruler, Yazdagird, was killed in Khurasan (651). At this stage the Arab empire comprised the Arabian peninsula, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Iran.

The rapid expansion of the Arabs has been attributed by G.E. von Grunebaum partly to the mobility of the camel-riding Arabs and partly to the decline of Byzantine and Sassanid military power. Using their camels the Arabs could move with great speed through the difficult desert terrain. Nomadic armies are usually capable of very swift manouvres because they are not encumbered by too much baggage. The lance and the sword were the traditional weapons of Arab warfare. Saad is credited with introducing archers into the army. The beduin also relied on horses, which some of the tribes had bred for a long time as part of their traditional pattern of subsistence. As already mentioned, the Byzantines and Sassanids were unprepared for meeting such a determined challenge. The setbacks which these empires faced in their first encounters with the Arabs further demoralized their armies. The religious motivation of the Arabs was an additional factor which contributed to their success. The consequences of Arab expansion were more disastrous for the Sassanids than for the Byzantines. Sassanid rule was completely extinguished, whereas the Byzantine empire survived for several centuries though its territories were confined to Anatolia, Greece and a few other parts of south-eastern Europe.

Umar was killed in 644 by a person who had a personal grievance against him. Umar had appointed a board of six selectors to nominate a successor after him. The selectors were not to name anyone from among themselves as the caliph. Usman, another early Meccan convert to Islam, was named successor to Umar. Usman became the third caliph (644-56). Usman was one of the *muhajirun* but he belonged

to the Umayyad clan. This caused considerable indignation among the Hashimites. The most vehement opposition came from the legitimists—the supporters of Ali. It may be mentioned that the claim of Ali had been put forward ever since the death of Muhammad but he had been overlooked every time a successor was chosen. Usman made himself unpopular by allowing members of the Umayyad clan to occupy all major official positions. Although the conquest of Iran was completed under Usman, the initial pace of expansion slowed down after c. 650. This added to the growing dissatisfaction with Usman's rule. Some of the Arab settlements in southern Iraq and Egypt became centres of opposition to the caliph. There was a revolt by the Egyptian troops and amidst the ensuing chaos Usman was assassinated in 656.

The murder of Usman marks the end of one phase of the formation of the Arab empire. All this while, Madina had remained the capital. Till the time of Abu Bakr the Islamic state had been confined to Arabia. Umar and Usman had built a vast empire extending from the Nile to the margins of Central Asia. They had to therefore evolve an infrastructure for governing such a large political entity. Umar had emphasized the military authority of the caliph by taking on the title of *amir al muminin* (commander of the faithful). As *amir al muminin* the caliph was the supreme commander of the troops. This reinforced his religious and political authority. In other words political, military and religious power was initially combined in one person—the caliph. The Arab tribes which constituted the Muslim community or *umma* were at the the armed force of the state. All able-bodied male adults of the *umma* had to render military service. The soldiers were grouped according the respective tribes to which they belonged and fought under the leadership of their tribal chiefs (though the overall command of the army might be with the *amir al muminin* or someone appointed by him).

Unlike in Arabia, the Arabs were outsiders in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Palestine and Egypt. For several years they were

primarily an army of occupation and it was only gradually that they got integrated with the conquered areas. The troops were stationed in fortified camps or garrisons, called *amsar* (singular *misr*; *amsar* should not be confused with *ansar*), located at strategic points. In Iraq the Arabs preferred to set up their own garrison towns whereas in Syria they usually lived in existing towns which had been abandoned by the retreating Byzantines. Significantly, the Arabs did not occupy the Sassanid capital Ctesiphon despite having captured it. They founded two new cities in southern Iraq where the troops and administrative personnel were lodged. These cities were Kufa and Basra, which were founded between c. 635 and 638. Kufa was situated on the banks of the Euphrates, very close to Hira, and Basra was at the mouth of the Persian Gulf. Basra grew into a major commercial centre. In Syria the Arabs selected an old market town, Damascus, as their main military-cum-administrative centre. In Egypt the settlement of Fustat was founded at the edge of the Nile delta in c. 641. Fustat later developed into Cairo.

As military conquest was looked upon as a collective enterprise, the spoils of war were, to be shared by the community as a whole. According to the principles laid down by the Prophet, one-fifth of the booty went to the state and the rest was distributed among the *umma*. Given the unprecedented scale of conquest, Umar had to ensure that the distribution of the booty did not take place in a haphazard manner. The booty was distributed by the state in the form of lump-sum military stipends. The amount of stipend which a person received was determined by the nature of his service and stage at which his family or clan had accepted Islam. Thus, the *muhajirun* and their descendants would be ranked first and so on. The allocations were made centrally while the actual disbursement might be made in the area where a person was serving. All Muslims were liable to pay the *zakat* tax, which was assessed on their possessions.

For the time being the complex question of land was resolved by keeping it under the control of the state instead

of dividing it among individual Arab families. Land was held by the central government on behalf of the *umma*. The land which came under the control of the Arab state was i) Byzantine or Sassanid crown land; ii) land abandoned by the former owners; and iii) land on which the subject population had forfeited its property rights because they had resisted the Arabs. In all these cases a share of the produce was taken from the cultivators or the intermediaries and redistributed among the Arabs in the form of pensions along the lines of the formula for distributing booty. It must be remembered that this was the first time that the Arabs had gained access to such an enormous agrarian surplus derived from land. Hence it took some time to evolve a regular system of land administration. For over half a century there was considerable confusion with regard to patterns of landownership and categories of land revenue. We should not assume that the stipends or pensions paid by the state amounted to an equitable distribution of wealth. Earlier disparities were reinforced and soon a privileged Muslim elite emerged in the conquered territories. Nevertheless the measures of Umar and Usman helped to maintain the cohesion of the *umma* in the first phase of expansion. Usman had placed severe restrictions on the private purchase of land in southern Iraq by wealthy Meccans when he found that provisions laid down by Umar were being violated.

Umar was responsible for systematization of Islamic ritual. The mosque, where the males of the community gathered for prayer, became the centre of the religious life of Muslims. In the *amsar* the practice of praying collectively was one of the ways in which the *umma* could be brought together by giving to Arab troops drawn from different tribes a strong sense of identity. Umar sent out Quran reciters to the garrison towns to familiarize the residents with its text. Although some parts of the Quran were written down, most of it was transmitted orally. Umar and Usman initiated the writing down and standardization of the entire text. This task was completed under Usman and the standardized text dates from his time. Umar instituted a new

Islamic era commencing from the year of the *hijrat* (622). This is a lunar calendar of twelve equal months and is 11 days less than the actual year of 365.25 days.

IV

There was a violent struggle over the question of succession after Usman. No unanimity could be arrived at and the political crisis deteriorated to a point where a virtual civil war broke out in the Arab empire. Some of the differences which arose in that period have persisted down to the present day in the shape of numerous religious sects within Islam. At Madina the supporters of Ali had joined hands with the rebels from Egypt and they proclaimed Ali as the caliph. This was not acceptable to the Umayyads. Another faction led by Zubayr, an associate of Muhammad, and Muhammad's widow Aisha also opposed Ali. The most serious challenge came from Muawiya, the governor of Syria, who was a descendent of Umayya and a cousin of Usman. Muawiya had a strong base among the Arabs of Syria. He openly revolted against Ali. Ali had shifted his capital from Madina to Kufa in Iraq. He had a large following at this place. Except for Syria, all other regions had recognized Ali as the caliph. In order to seek Muawiya's submission Ali marched towards Syria with his troops. An armed encounter between the armies of Ali and Muawiya took place at Siffin in northern Mesopotamia (657). The battle was inconclusive and both sides agreed to arbitration. Nothing concrete emerged from the negotiations and Muawiya became the *de facto* ruler of Syria. AH ruled over the rest of the empire from his capital at Kufa (Madina was too inconveniently located to be the seat of government).

The events leading to Ali's withdrawal from Siffin provoked the first major sectarian division in Islam. There was one group which held that Ali was divinely endowed with special qualities of leadership by virtue of his belonging to the family of the Prophet and being the 'true'

successor. He was incapable of making any error. This group, called *shiah* (*shiah* is a collective noun which literally means 'party', and here implies 'the party of Ali'; the adherents of this party are the *shii* or Shiites), had unquestioning faith in Ali and fully endorsed his actions at Siffin. On the other hand there was a breakaway group which was opposed to any arbitration between Muawiya and Ali. In their opinion Ali's conduct amounted to a compromise with the Umayyads. For this group Ali was no longer the leader of the Muslim community! Those who took this extreme position acquired the label of Kharijis or secessionists: the Kharijis had seceded from Ali, and of course from Muawiya and the Umayyads. The Kharijis continued to be a source of trouble for the Arab state for at least half a century. Small bands of Khariji rebels harassed the government in different parts of the empire. The Kharijis evolved their own religious interpretations and their doctrines influenced the development of Islamic theology even after the movement itself died out by the beginning of the eighth century. Arab history in the post-Siffin period was marked by an unequal contest between the Umayyads, Kharijis and Shiites, a contest in which the Umayyads emerged as the winners. Of course there were a large number of Muslims who took no sides in this contest.

Ali was murdered by a Khariji assassin in 661. Muawiya now formally declared himself as the caliph. There was a brief attempt to promote the candidature of Ali's eldest son Hasan, but the Shiites failed to muster enough support. Damascus became the new capital of the Arab empire. Muawiya began the process of transforming the caliphate into a monarchy. Between 661 and 750 all caliphs were from the Umayyad clan. This is known as the period of the Umayyad caliphate. In Muslim historiography a clear distinction is made between the first four caliphs and the Umayyad and later caliphates. Abu Bakr, Umar, Usman and Ali are generally referred to as the 'pious caliphs' or *rashidun* (i.e. 'rightly guided' caliphs). With Muawiya monarchical rule based on the dynastic principle was established. The

Umayyad caliphs projected themselves as religious leaders but ultimately their power rested on force.

Muawiya, who ruled from 661 to 680, reinforced the concept of hereditary succession by naming his son Yazid as the heir. Yazid (680-3) became caliph after his father's death. Once again the Shiites put forth the claim of Ali's family. They announced their support for Ali's younger son, Husayn (Hasan had died in 669). Husayn's supporters, who were concentrated in southern Iraq (mainly in Kufa), mobilized a contingent of soldiers for armed resistance against the Umayyads. In 680 Husayn led a small band of followers to fight the Umayyad army. The battle took place at Karbala, not far from Kufa. Husayn's force was massacred and Husayn himself was killed. The slaying of Husayn on the battlefield made him a martyr not only for the Shiites but for many of those who were opposed to the shape which the caliphate had taken. Husayn's martyrdom became a powerful religious symbol for the Shiites and was henceforth to be the rallying point for their cause. This event is commemorated every year as a period of mourning during the Islamic month of Muharram, i.e. the month in which the battle of Karbala took place.

Yazid's brief reign witnessed numerous uprisings. Besides the Shiites and the Kharijis, several sections of the people of Madina were also opposed to his succession. Yazid hardly had any time to settle down and passed away in 683. He was survived by a minor son, Muawiya II, who was installed as the new caliph. Muawiya II died shortly afterwards. To the opponents of the Umayyads the succession of both Yazid and Muawiya II was a complete negation of the concept of the caliphate. From 684 onwards a prolonged civil war engulfed the Arab empire. The major adversaries of the Umayyads were the old Muslim families of Mecca and Madina who were aligned with a tribal confederacy headed by the Qays tribe of southern Arabia.

With the centre of political power having shifted towards Syria (and to a lesser extent Iraq) Arabia had been

increasingly marginalized. The growing alienation of Mecca and Madina was now converted into a revolt led by Ibn Zubayr. Ibn Zubayr was proclaimed the new caliph in 684 and Madina was restored as the capital. For the next few years Arabia became virtually independent. Some areas were controlled by Ibn Zubayr while others were under the Kharijis. Most of Iraq owed allegiance to Ibn Zubayr. The Kharijis briefly upheld Ibn Zubayr's claim, but on the whole the two were hostile to each other. Throughout the empire Arab communities were split along the lines of the three warring factions: Ibn Zubayr, the Umayyads and the Kharijis.

Meanwhile the leadership of the Umayyads was assumed by another branch of the clan. This was the family of Marwan. Muawiya, Yazid and Muawiya II belonged to the family of Abu Sufiyan, a grandson of Umayya. They are therefore often referred to as Sufiyanid Umayyads. Marwan was descended from a cousin of Abu Sufiyan. He and his Umayyad successors are called Marwanid Umayyads. Marwan had earlier served as the chief adviser of caliph Usman (to whom he was closely related). In 684 Marwan defeated Ibn Zubayr at the battle of Marj Rahat which enabled the Umayyads to recover Syria.

Marwan died in 685 and was succeeded by Abd al-Malik. Abd al-Malik (685-705) rebuilt the Umayyad state, strengthened the caliphate and extended the borders of the empire. A series of campaigns had to be directed against Ibn Zubayr and the Khariji rebels before they could be defeated. All of Iraq had submitted to Abd al-Malik by 691 and in 692 Mecca and Madina were occupied. Ibn Zubayr was killed. It was only after 692 that Umayyad rule was stabilized. The person who played the most prominent role in the campaigns against Ibn Zubayr was a military commander named al-Hajjaj. He was from the Thaqif tribe of Taif and was in-charge of the action at Mecca. Al-Hajjaj was subsequently appointed governor of Iraq and the eastern territories of the empire which he ruled with an iron hand till his death in 714.

Under Abd al-Malik the caliphate became an absolute monarchy. Political and military power was concentrated in the hands of a small ruling elite presided over by the caliph. The caliph wielded supreme authority. Abd al-Malik developed a bureaucratic apparatus for governing the empire. The army was reorganized to make it a professional standing army rather than a league of tribal contingents. Several features which had survived from former Byzantine and Sassanid regimes were abandoned. The Byzantines had used Greek and the Sassanids had used Pahlavi (a type of Persian which linguists call 'Middle Persian') as their official languages. When the Arabs occupied the territories of these empires most of the routine governmental work was still done in Greek and Pahlavi in the respective areas. This was partly dictated by necessity because the bulk of the lower and middle level administrative personnel had been serving the former rulers. Abd al-Malik vigorously pursued a policy of arabization. He replaced Greek and Pahlavi with Arabic as the language of the administration. An innovative and distinctive coinage was introduced which was very different in its design from the coins issued by the Byzantines and Sassanids. The coins of Abd al-Malik carried no portraits but only had some written text engraved on them. The text was inscribed in Arabic and included words from the Quran. This was to remain the basic format for coins issued by Muslim rulers throughout the world. Abd al-Malik's reign was also a period of hectic building activity. Monumental public buildings, mainly mosques and palaces, were constructed in the principal cities of the empire. A number of grand buildings came up in the capital Damascus. The most famous monument built at the initiative of Abd al-Malik was the structure known as 'Dome of the Rock'—*Al-Aqsa* mosque—in Jerusalem (692). The Dome of the Rock was constructed at a site which was held sacred by the Jews as well the Muslims due to its association with Abraham. The imposing dome on this mosque defined a new architectural expression which became one of the most enduring elements of Islamic architecture.

Abd al-Malik and his successor al-Walid I (705-15) embarked upon a new phase of territorial expansion. The most significant conquests took place in northern Africa and the western Mediterranean. Egypt was used as the launching pad for campaigns in the western parts of northern Africa. The entire stretch of northern Africa, from the western borders of Egypt to the Atlantic coast, was referred to by the Arabs as 'the Maghrib'. The Maghrib is bound by the Mediterranean in the north and the Sahara in the south. It comprises present-day Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. The Arabs began making inroads into the Maghrib in the latter half of the seventh century and by the end of the century they had occupied the Roman province of Africa (called Ifriqiya by the Arabs; now known as Tunisia). In Ifriqiya the leading garrison town of the Arabs was Qayrawan (Kairoun, in south-eastern Tunisia), which was founded in c. 670. Qayrawan became the first Arab urban centre in the Maghrib. By the beginning of the eighth century the entire Maghrib was under Umayyad rule. Arab consolidation in the Maghrib was facilitated by the ties which they forged with local nomadic people known as the Berbers. Many of the Berber tribes adopted Islam and got arabized. Subsequent campaigns in the western Mediterranean were jointly undertaken by the Arabs and Berbers. By 711 Umayyad armies had invaded western Europe. The Visigoths were dislodged from Spain, which was incorporated into the Arab empire. Further advance into Europe was checked by the Franks.

Umayyad power was based primarily on Syrian support. The surplus produced by the Syrian economy provided the initial resources for the Umayyads to extend their authority. The agricultural produce of the rich and fertile tract lying between the Tigris and the Euphrates in southern Iraq was another vital component of the Umayyad economy in the Marwanid era. The provincial government of Al-Hajjaj laid great stress on the improvement of irrigation works in southern Iraq. There is evidence to suggest that there was some agricultural expansion in this region during the early

decades of the eighth century. It should be borne in mind that southern Iraq had been the main political and economic centre of the Sassanid empire.

A few general observations about Umayyad society may be made at this stage. Firstly, both Syria and Iraq had a fairly large Arab population at the time of the Islamic conquests. Secondly, the Arab component of the population was somewhat larger in Syria than in Iraq. Third, when the Arabs invaded Syria the Greek-speaking Byzantine landed aristocracy fled from the country, whereas in Iraq the Persian landowners remained in place and were initially accommodated as intermediaries in the land revenue system. Fourth, the Arabs began to penetrate the countryside of Syria at a relatively early date as compared to Iraq. Fifth, by the beginning of the eighth century the Arab settlers of Iraq were also not confined just to the cities but had begun acquiring land in southern Iraq as private holdings. Sixth, whereas there was extensive Arab colonization in Syria and Iraq, Iran (i.e. the area lying east of the Zagros mountains) itself was not colonized by the Arabs. Khurasan may be cited as the one exception to this. There was a sizeable Arab concentration in this north-eastern frontier region of Iran. Finally, the key to Umayyad domination over Syria, and through it over the Arab empire, was their alliance with the Quzaa (or Kalb) tribal confederacy. The tribes which comprised the Quzaa confederacy were numerically the single largest Arab group in Syria. Patricia Crone has stated that (*Slaves on Horses*), 'Syria was an exceptional province, firstly in that the Arab population was spread evenly over the countryside, and secondly in that one confederacy, the Quzaa, by far outnumbered any other tribe. It was thus possible for the Syrian as for no other governor to rely on a local group'.

When the Arabs first settled in the *amsar* in Byzantine and Sassanid territories they were grouped according to their tribal affiliations which were combined to form semi-artificial tribal units. Each garrison town was divided into sectors (or quarters) which were allotted to separate tribal

units. Arab tribes were the basis of military and administrative organization. The respective sectors in which the tribes resided were the centres of their social and religious life. These sectors were virtually autonomous segments of the urban settlement. The city was thus more of a collection of tribal localities. Ira Lapidus states that, 'Quarters [i.e. sectors] were village-like communities within the urban whole. Indeed some quarters were suburban districts composed of people of recent village or beduin origin. These sharply divided city populations enjoyed relatively few institutions which cut across quarter boundaries to bind them together'.

Initially each sector was placed under the chief of the dominant tribe living in it. This chief, or *rais al qabila*, was the main link between the central or provincial governments and the sectors. He was answerable for the tribes under him. It was through the *rais al qabila* that stipends or pensions were paid and taxes were realized. Mobilizing troops from the tribal units for military campaigns was the duty of the *rais al qabila*. The *rais al qabila* were the ruling elite (*ashraf*) of the early Umayyad state. In Syria at least the *ashraf* were invariably drawn from tribes which were loyal to the Umayyad house. Abd al-Malik reformed this system in order to create a standing army with regular troops maintained by the state. Tribal units were reconstituted into regiments called *funds*, *funds* were not kinship groups. The *junds* were commanded by *qaid*s, who were military commanders and might not necessarily be tribal chiefs. This was an attempt to dissolve tribal loyalties within the army and impart a professional character to it.

In the first phase of Arab expansion in West Asia the pace of conversion to Islam in the former Byzantine and Sassanid territories was very slow. The earliest Muslims identified Islam with the Arabs. Islam was regarded as the religion of the Arab tribes. Usually the conversion to Islam was a tribal and not an individual affair. A tribe as a whole would adopt the new creed (there were, of course, a few exceptions). The military, administrative and social

organization of the Arab Muslims, as we have seen, was along tribal lines. Initially ties of tribe or clan remained intact in the conquered territories. In Syria, Iraq and Egypt the Muslims lived in garrison towns from where they controlled the neighbouring countryside. They were not encouraged to have much interaction with the local populace. The garrison towns were islands of Arab presence in these countries. Yet complete isolation was out of the question. The practical compulsions of administering such vast territories with their highly developed economies necessitated some intercourse with the subject non-Arab population. The systematic extraction of surplus by the Arab ruling class required the collaboration of local elites. In Syria the problem was more acute since the Byzantine upper class had taken refuge in the areas which were still ruled by Constantinople. Nevertheless, there were a few officials who stayed on and offered their services to the Arabs.

In the case of Iraq and Iran there was a class of well-entrenched landowners and village chiefs called *dihqans* who had assisted the Sassanid government in the collection of land revenue. The *dihqans* retained their position under the Arabs, even though they lost many of their privileges. They continued to be the dominant class in the rural areas. The *dihqans* collected the land tax from villages and paid it to the government. They also carried out numerous other administrative functions. Over a period of time many of them began to reside permanently in Arab cities and embraced Islam. Simultaneously Arab settlers were penetrating the countryside, a phenomenon which was particularly apparent in Syria. As more and more Arabs developed economic and social relationships with areas outside the garrison towns, many local inhabitants became Muslims. By the end of the seventh century non-Arab Muslims were to be found both in urban centres and the countryside.

Given that Muslims were only visualized as belonging to specific Arab tribes and that these tribes were the very basis of military and administrative organization, a way had

to be found for accommodating non-Arab Muslims—who often converted in small batches—within this structure. The problem was resolved by allocating the non-Arabs to some Arab tribe. What is significant is that non-Arabs who entered the fold had an inferior status. This inferior status was institutionalized by making the non-Arabs accept the overlordship of the respective tribes to which they were attached. The non-Arab convert was classified as *maula* (plural *mawali*) or dependent of the tribe. The *mawali* had a subordinate position within the tribe. Later, when tribes ceased to play a role in the military and administrative organization of the state non-Arab Muslims became *mawali* of individuals or families.

There had been an appreciable increase in the proportion of non-Arab Muslims by the beginning of the eighth century. Crone has suggested that under the early Umayyads the greater part of the converts were war captives who had been made slaves. These slaves were subsequently manumitted when they converted (theoretically Muslims could not be slaves). She has pointed out that there was extensive enslavement during the early Arab conquests. The manumitted slaves were accorded a low status in Muslim society when they converted. This partly accounts for the subordination of the *mawali*.

There was a marginal improvement in the status of the *mawali* when the landowning classes (*dihqans*, etc.) and former Sassanid officials of Iraq and Iran began to adopt Islam. This process gathered momentum with the incorporation of these groups into the administrative structure. Al-Hajjaj had curtailed the autonomy of the *dihqans* by centralizing the collection of land revenue and placing the *mawali* in charge of it. The *dihqans* now had an additional incentive to convert. The adoption of Islam by the *dihqans* was usually accompanied by the conversion of the villages controlled by them. Some of the Marwanid Abbasids, as for instance Umar II (717-20), actively promoted conversions. Moreover the interaction between Arab settlers and the local population, which took place at

various levels, undermined Arab exclusivism. The non-Arab Muslims were no longer content with the status of *maula* and aspired for equality within the community. These developments led to widespread resentment against Umayyad rule, particularly in Iraq and Iran.

The Umayyads were unpopular among several sections of the Arabs as well. Their government was looked upon as being authoritarian and corrupt. The state had become militarily weak which made it difficult for the Umayyads to control the far-flung areas of the empire. Some of the commanders took advantage of this situation to make themselves powerful in the areas in which they were posted. A new class of Arab traders, government officials, absentee landlords and rural intermediaries had arisen within the former Sassanid territories. This class wanted some share in power. In view of the narrow social base of the Umayyads, which was primarily confined to Syria, these groups could not be accommodated without disturbing the delicate balance of tribal alignments which sustained the state. There had also been occasional uprisings against the Umayyads by the clans and tribes opposed to them. The most consistent foes of the Umayyads were the Hashimites and the Alids. Thus the dissatisfaction of the *mawali* combined with the opposition of diverse Arab groups led to a strong anti-Umayyad sentiment in the empire by the mid-eighth century.

In the 740s an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of the Umayyads came into existence. Till almost the last moment the leadership of this movement remained underground. It worked in complete secrecy to mobilize all the forces which were opposed to the Umayyads for one reason or another. Though the origins of the movement are somewhat obscure, there is no doubt that its real leaders were the Hashimites. The Hashimites had never reconciled themselves to Umayyad supremacy. The movement was guided by the Abbasids, a branch of the Hashimites who were descendants of Muhammad's paternal uncle al-Abbas.

The headquarters of the Abbasids were at an isolated village

named al-Humayma which was situated in the desert to the south of Syria. From al-Humayma a number of agents were sent out to gather support for the Abbasid cause. The main strength of the movement was in Khurasan which, as we have noted, had a large Arab population. Here a leading role was played by Abu Muslim, a military commander and outstanding organizer. Abu Muslim managed to collect a large army from among the Arab settlers of Khurasan. He also enlisted the assistance of the local *mawali*. Abbasid propagandists made an appeal to the anti-Umayyad feelings of the Alids and even vaguely indicated that someone from the family of Ali would be made the caliph. But it became clear later that the Abbasids had no intention of handing over power to the Alids. The Abbasids preferred to remain concealed until the movement had attained its objective and only then did they reveal as to who would succeed the Umayyads.

Umayyad rule came to an end in 749-50. The Khurasani army mobilized by Abu Muslim was instrumental in ousting them from power. The last Umayyad caliph, Marwan II, fled to Egypt and was killed there. It was only when Abu Muslim had accomplished his task that the Abbasid leader Abul Abbas al-Saffah (*al-saffah* literally means 'the avenger') was declared the new caliph. This inaugurated the 500 year long reign of the Abbasids. The Abbasid caliphate lasted till 1258, though they enjoyed supreme power only for about a century after which they were more of figureheads and were reduced to being figureheads by the tenth century.

With the rise of the Abbasids the centre of political power shifted from Syria to southern Iraq. Corresponding to this was the marginalization of Syria. Whereas the Khurasanis were the staunchest allies of the Abbasids, Khurasan itself was a frontier area and was therefore not suitable for governing such a large empire. The economy of southern Iraq could provide the resources necessary for maintaining

the Abbasid imperial government. The Persian empire of the Sassanids too had its nucleus in this region. It was here that the Sassanid administrative structure was concentrated. The *dihaans* and erstwhile Sassanid officials who had become *mazuali* had a strong presence in this fertile tract. They had backed the Abbasids in their struggle against the Umayyads and they were to be henceforth one of the pillars of the Abbasid regime. Persian *mazvali* were recruited in the civil administration and the army on a large scale from the middle of the eighth century. The *mawali* rose to high positions and the local and regional elites among them got a share in political power. Most of the Iranians adopted Islam in the following two centuries. This implied that the Iranian component of the Muslim population of West Asia outnumbered the Arabs. Once a section of the Persian *mawali* had become part of the ruling class the distinction between Arab and non-Arab Muslims no longer had much meaning. Social differentiation among the Muslims was now primarily along class lines. Even the use of the term *maula* was gradually dispensed with.

Arab expansion into the Iranian world (which in the context of the Abbasid caliphate included parts of present-day Afghanistan and extended beyond the Oxus river) was a turning point in the development of Islam. Islamic consolidation in Iran under the Abbasids produced a rich synthesis through the fusion of Arab and Iranian traditions. The civilization which flourished under the early Abbasids was rooted in this synthesis. As a result of this synthesis many of the features of the Sassanid monarchical state were carried over to Islam. Thus, what has been referred to as the 'Abbasid revolution' had far-reaching implications for Arab-Iranian-Islamic history.

Al-Saffah died in 754. He was succeeded by his brother al-Mansur (754-75). Marshall Hodgson regards the eighty years from the accession of al-Mansur to the death of the Abbasid caliph al-Mamun in 833 as marking the climax of the 'High Caliphate'. In his periodization of Islamic history Hodgson, has termed the era of the Marwanid Umayyads

and the early Abbasids (from 684 to c. 900) as the 'High Caliphate', as distinct from the 'Primitive Caliphate' which preceded it (632-683). The most outstanding of the early Abbasids were al-Mansur, Harun al-Rashid (786-809) and al-Mamun (813-33).

In al-Mansur's reign the caliphate became even more of an absolutist monarchy than it had been under the Marwanids. The Sassanid conception of kingship, combining temporal and spiritual authority, was adopted to uphold the caliph's supreme authority. An elaborate court ceremonial, much of it borrowed from the Sassanids (though there were also Byzantine inputs) was introduced. The person of the caliph became unapproachable, signifying distance between ruler and ruled. If at all someone was allowed into the caliph's presence it was necessary to prostrate oneself and kiss the ground. The splendour of the court emphasized the majesty of the caliph.

Southern Iraq at this time had three prominent Arab cities. We have already referred to Kufa and Basra. Besides, there was Wasit located on the Tigris, north of Basra. Wasit had been the headquarters of Al-Hajjaj and had been founded by him in c. 702. Al-Mansur discovered that none of these cities could cater to his needs. Ctesiphon (Madain), the imperial capital of the Sassanids was decaying. The caliph decided to build an imposing capital for himself in southern Iraq. In 762 he founded Baghdad on the banks of the Tigris. The site of the city was not far from ancient Ctesiphon. Initially this was a cantonment for the Khurasan army of the Abbasids. Many scholars regard the founding of Baghdad as having a deeper symbolic significance whereby al-Mansur tried to present himself as a ruler in the tradition of the Sassanids and their Hellenistic predecessors.

Right since the time of Alexander the Great the formal founding of cities was a symbolic act which denoted imperial power. This was a concept that was alien to Arabia where urban centres were non-existent. The first Arab cities in the Byzantine and Sassanid territories had grown out of the *amsar*. Damascus, the capital of the Umayyads, was an

old Roman town which was converted into a military-cum-administrative centre. Baghdad, on the other hand, was planned on a grand scale from the outset. It was conceived as a circular city which came up around the palace of the caliph and a large mosque. The boundaries of the city were marked by a number of gates. Baghdad remained the residence of the Abbasid caliphs till the end (except for a very short period when it was shifted to Samarra). It grew into one of the great metropolises of the world and was perhaps the largest city of the Middle Ages.

The eighth and ninth centuries were a period of urban expansion in the Islamic world. Baghdad, Kufa, Wasit and Basra were the main cities of Iraq. Al-Mansur was responsible for building walls around Kufa and Basra (c. 770). The population of Basra at the beginning of the eighth century is estimated to have been 200,000 while Kufa had a population of 100,000. Basra became the main port for Baghdad and was an important transit point in the Indian Ocean trade route which passed through the Persian Gulf. In Iran the leading urban centres were Nishapur, Marv and Tus in Khurasan. The prosperity of the cities of Khurasan was directly linked to the importance of this region in the early phase of Abbasid rule. Nishapur was the principal town of Khurasan. It lay on the Central Asian trade route and benefited from the commerce which went along this artery. Nishapur was also an eminent centre of learning. Beyond Khurasan in Central Asia new urban centres like Balkh and Bukhara were rising to prominence.

In the west, Syria had lost its former prestige. Damascus, which had been the capital of a vast empire for almost a century, was now just a provincial town. However, it still remained the chief metropolis of Syria. Aleppo and Antioch (the capital of the province under the Romans) were the other leading cities of Syria. The ancient ports of Byblos, Sidon and Tyre on the Lebanese coast continued to flourish due the hectic commercial activity of the eastern Mediterranean. In Palestine/ the development of Jerusalem received a fresh stimulus when it became a religious centre

for the Muslims in the 690s. Jerusalem was already a major place of pilgrimage for the Jews and the Christians.

In Egypt where urban decay had set in with the decline of the Roman empire/ the ruralization of the economy was almost complete at the time of the Arab conquest. As we have noted above, the main Arab garrison in Egypt was located on the Nile, at the edge of the delta. This was called Fustat and became the largest city in Egypt. When Cairo was founded adjacent to Fustat in the tenth century, Fustat merged with it (Fustat is now part of Old Cairo). The great Mediterranean port of Alexandria had already lost its former glory and was now fully eclipsed with the rise of Fustat. In the Maghrib the founding of Qayrawan was followed by the creation of a new city near the Mediterranean coast. The site of this city was a Roman settlement called Tynes on the outskirts of ancient Carthage. It is from Tynes, or Tunis, that the name of the present-day country of Tunisia (corresponding to Ifriqiya) is derived. In the rest of the Maghrib the emergence of new cities was somewhat slower. Most of the old Roman towns had disappeared. The city of Fez (now in Morocco) at the western extremity of the Maghrib, which grew into a major urban settlement, was founded only in 808. Finally, in Spain, which the Arabs called Andalus, the capital of the territories ruled by the Muslims was at Cordoba (Qurtuba). Cordoba, situated on the Guadalquivir river which flows through southern Spain, was founded in c. 719. As it expanded it became the preeminent Arab city in western Europe, although the really intensive growth of Cordoba occurred in the tenth century.

The urban expansion of this period was not merely sustained by the military and administrative requirements of the Arabs but also a reflection of the expansion of trade. Political unification of such a large area, extending from the western Mediterranean to Central Asia, promoted commercial exchanges. Long-distance trade between the Mediterranean world and the Indian Ocean and Central Asia was facilitated by the relative stability of the eighth and ninth centuries. Goods moved along the sea route from China, via India, to

the Persian Gulf. In the Gulf there were two major Abbasid ports: Siraf in Iran and Basra in Iraq. The seaborne trade from Siraf and Basra to various places in south-east Asia was organized by Arab and Iranian merchants, who included a number of Jews. Ships were regularly sent out as far as China, although the Arab and Iranian merchants tended to concentrate on the Arabian Sea segment of the route. From Siraf or Basra goods were taken overland to Syria and Palestine and then entered the Mediterranean network. Some of the goods were sent for sale to Baghdad while a small proportion might go onwards to Nishapur to enter the Central Asian network. The traditional Central Asian overland route linking China with West Asia and the Mediterranean was another busy highway of international commerce.

There was a change in the orientation of the Mediterranean commercial network in this period. With the decline of trade in early medieval Europe the focus of longdistance trade in the Mediterranean sea moved southwards to north Africa (Egypt and the Maghrib). Ships laden with cargo plied between Egypt, or the Lebanese ports, and Spain. Tunis, lying midway along this route, was a major point of transit. Sicily was also part of this network as it was ruled by the Arabs. Later, Venice too began to participate in this trade. The Jews occupied a key position in the trading world of the Mediterranean. Egypt had a large concentration of Jewish merchants who handled a sizeable proportion of the Mediterranean and Red Sea trade, including the trade between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. The discovery, a few decades back, of a huge collection of documents belonging to the Jewish merchant community of Fustat from a storehouse (the Cairo Geniza) where these were deposited, has shed considerable light on the commercial activities of the Jews in the Arab empire.

Spices, fine quality silk and cotton textiles, precious stones, furs, and a few other luxury goods such as chinaware were carried from south-east Asia and India to West Asia and Europe. These commodities were in demand in the new urban centres of the Arab empire. This international trade

catered to the large market for luxury goods in the cities where the rulers and their courts resided. The ostentatious lifestyle of the caliph was imitated by the provincial aristocracy which also lived lavishly thereby generating the demand for a wide range of high value commodities. The biggest consumers were to be found in Baghdad, Damascus, Nishapur, Fustat and Cordoba. The cities of the Muslim world were themselves centres of handicraft production, and some of these products were exchanged for the commodities which were imported. Weapons, paper, ivory, sugar, olive oil, slaves, gold and horses were the commodities which the Arab-ruled territories sent out. The growth of trade rapidly gave rise to a Muslim urban middle class consisting of traders, shopkeepers, commission agents and shipowners. However, unlike the bourgeoisie of medieval Europe which exercised control over the towns, the Muslim middle class had little control over the political institutions of cities in which they resided. The reason for this was, as S.D. Goitein observes, that the urban centres of the Arabs were primarily developed by the state for administrative or military purposes and were therefore closely supervised by the government. In this situation the middle class could hardly hope to occupy a position of authority in the city. This might perhaps partially explain why these cities could not have become the starting point for transition to capitalism.

In any case the importance of trade in the Abbasid economy should not be exaggerated. Land was the principal source of wealth. The early Abbasids were keen to promote the agrarian economy of southern Iraq since this was the core area of their state. It was on this region that they depended first and foremost for their resources. They endeavoured to maximize production by extending cultivation and improving irrigation. Al-Hajjaj had launched a programme for repairing the irrigation works of the Sassanids. The Abbasids took over from where he had left off and restored and expanded the complex network of canals in southern Iraq. Existing irrigation techniques were modified and more efficient devices for lifting water to

irrigate fields were adopted. The most outstanding achievement in this sphere was the dissemination of the water-wheel or *noria* (*naura*). This device was already in use in Syria. It was a great improvement over the simple method of lifting water with the help of a rope and bucket. *Noria* is a machine which is powered by oxen or some other draught animal. The animals turn a horizontal wheel to which a vertical wheel is attached. The vertical wheel has a number of buckets or jars which lift the water and discharge it into a channel from where it is distributed in the fields. *Noria* and its variants came to be widely used in Iraq and Egypt and spread as far as Spain.

In Iran the system of constructing underground canals, called *qanats*, for carrying water from springs to irrigate fields, had survived from the Sassanid era. The earlier *qanats* were artificial streams which were covered in order to prevent evaporation of water. *Qanat* irrigation was mainly prevalent in places which were situated at the foothills of mountains. Mountain springs were tapped by this process. In Iran the ancient *qanats* which had ceased to function (due to silting or the collapse of their covers) were rebuilt. The network was extended within and outside Iran. It was adapted to desert springs and the technique was employed wherever water was scarce.

The collection of land revenue was made uniform in the eighth and ninth centuries. We have drawn attention to the fact that it was the conquest of the Byzantine and Sassanid territories that placed a large agrarian surplus at the disposal of the Arabs. This was an entirely new situation which had the potential of causing a social upheaval among the nomadic tribes. The early caliphs had tried to discourage the Muslims from converting the land in conquered territories as their private holdings. Later, as Arab settlers began to acquire land a distinction was made between Muslim and non-Muslim landowners. The main tax paid by the Muslims was *zakat* which was theoretically meant for charitable purposes. This was normally assessed at the rate of 2Vi per cent of the payee's possessions (exclusive of land).

Landowning Muslims had to pay a tax on land called *ushr*. *Ushr* was assessed at the rate of one-tenth of the produce (hence *ushr* is often translated as tithe).

All non-Muslims were liable to pay a general tax called *jizya*. *Jizya* was levied on those who were classified as non-believers (*zimmis*), i.e. those who were outside the Muslim community or *umma*. This was not a tax on property or income and was collected on a per head basis. However the *zimmis* were classified according to their wealth for the assessment of *jizya*. The tax on land payable by non-Muslims was a separate category. This tax was called *kharaj*. The rate of assessment for *kharaj* depended on various factors (nature of soil, type of irrigation, status of ownership etc.) but it was seldom less than one-third of the produce.

We therefore see that there were two types of land tax: i) *ushr*, which had to be paid by Muslim landholders at the rate of one-tenth of the produce and ii) *kharaj*, which had to be paid by non-Muslim landholders at the rate of one-third or more of the produce. As long as there were very few Muslim landholders the distinction between *ushr* and *kharaj* did not create much of a problem. Most of the landowners were non-Muslims, especially in the Sassanid territories where the *dihqans* retained possession of their land, and therefore had to part with a large share of the surplus. Two simultaneous processes changed the situation. Firstly, a large landowning class had emerged among the Muslims by the beginning of the eighth century. Secondly, the pre-Islamic landed gentry adopted Islam in a big way and were added to the class of Muslim landholders.

To have continued with the existing dual structure of taxation would have reduced the income of the state because a lot of land which was earlier paying *kharaj* (the higher rate) would now be paying *ushr* (the lower rate). Whatever the terminology, ultimately it was a question of the rate at which the assessment was made. The Umayyads had experimented with different solutions to cope with this problem. Al-Hajjaj had decreed that any land that had once been assessed as *kharaj* land could not become *ushr* land even if the owner

became a Muslim. Umar II had gone to the extent of prohibiting Muslims from acquiring *kharaj* land. In the long run the difference between these two kinds of taxes disappeared^ By the beginning of the ninth century all land was paying *kharaj*, irrespective of whether or not it was owned by Muslims. This ensured that the state was not deprived of a high level of revenue. Under the Abbasids *kharaj* was the main source of agrarian revenue. Besides, the state derived its income from *zakat* levied on Muslims and *jizya* levied on non-Muslims. Finally, there were duties on trade and a variety of cesses none of which were theoretically valid according to Islamic law.

The Abbasid centralized state was managed by a huge bureaucracy. The infrastructure of this bureaucracy was a legacy of the Sassanids. The Sassanid imperial system, it must be remembered, had evolved over a period of four centuries. Persian monarchical traditions, going back to the Hellenistic age, had provided a readymade model for Abbasid absolutism. But it was the Sassanid administrative apparatus which helped to give shape to their absolutist state. What is more, many of the personnel were recruited from families with a history of civil service under the Sassanids.

From the time of al-Mansur onwards the civil administration was unified and placed under a powerful official who was designated 'vazir'. The vizarat developed into one of the most characteristic institutions of the Islamic state. The vazir was a powerful official, usually well-educated and having a knowledge of various branches of administration including military affairs. He presided over the bureaucracy (though not the army). The vazir was expected to supervise the civil administration, a job which required some specialized skills. It was through him that the officials communicated with the caliph. The term has at times been inaccurately rendered as 'prime minister'. It has been suggested by some scholars that the vizarat is an institution of Persian Sassanid origin. However there are others who have questioned this view and have pointed out that we must not assume a Persian origin for the office of Vazir' merely

because the Abbasids borrowed so heavily from the Sassanids. Goitein has argued that the vizarat was a specific product of the early Abbasid state. The word itself, he notes, is of Arabic and not Persian origin (vazir literally means helper in Arabic). It was first used to designate the agents who were 'helpers' or vazirs of the Abbasid cause. By the time of al-Mansur it became the title of the most prominent official who assisted the caliph.

The most famous of the early vazirs of the Abbasids were those belonging to the family of the Barmekids. The first person of the Barmekid family to be appointed vazir was Khalid bin Barmek. Khalid came from a family of Buddhist priests. His ancestors were grandpriests of a Buddhist monastery in Balkh. Khalid began his career under al-Saffah and rose to the office of vazir. Subsequently he became the vazir of al-Mansur. Khalid may be said to have given proper shape to the vizarat as an institution. Al-Mansur entrusted most of the routine work of governance to Khalid. Closely connected with the evolution of the vizarat was the practice of placing a senior bureaucrat in charge of the education and training of the heir-apparent and other princes. These tutors were often appointed as vazirs upon the succession of the princes. Khalid's son Yusuf was the tutor, and later vazir, of Harun al-Rashid. Yusuf's sons were tutors of Harun al-Rashid's sons. Jafar, one of the sons of Yusuf, succeeded his father as al-Rashid's vazir. The relationship between Harun al-Rashid and Jafar became legendary and is referred to in the stories of the *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. This relationship did not prevent the downfall of Jafar due to court intrigues, after which the Barmekid family lost its preeminent position. The fall of the Barmekids underlined the fact that the vazir was ultimately a civil servant and derived all his authority from the ruler. This was, after all, a pre-modern bureaucracy. The institution, nevertheless, continued to grow in importance and reached the peak of its development in the eleventh century.

The prosperity of the early Abbasid period was reflected in the scientific and cultural achievements of the age. The

intermingling of diverse cultural traditions gave rise to new ideas and enriched thought. The Abbasid rulers, especially al-Mamun, encouraged this process by commissioning translations of ancient Greek philosophical and scientific treatises. Major Greek texts were translated to Arabic which gave the Muslim intelligentsia access to the rich store of Greco-Roman knowledge. The works of Plato and Aristotle were translated and became widely known among Muslim thinkers. Hunyan bin Ishaq, who lived during the ninth century, was one of the most outstanding of the scholars who translated important Greek works into Arabic. The translation of Greek writings on medicine, including the great treatise of Hippocrates, led to significant advances in the field. A new tradition of Arab medicine (the Unani system of medicine) flourished on the basis of the Greek legacy (Unani was the Arabic term for Greek). This in turn led to the development of other disciplines such as chemistry. Arab scientists showed a lot of interest in alchemy, which may be regarded as the initial stage of chemistry, and thereby acquired a more thorough understanding of chemical processes.

Greek works on astronomy and mathematics were also read avidly by the Arabs. Al-Khwarazmi, who lived in the early ninth century, is one of the most famous mathematicians of the Abbasid period. Al-Khwarazmi was familiar with Indian achievements in mathematics and he used the Indian system of numerals in his calculations. The Arabs, it may be pointed out, held Indian science and mathematics in high esteem. Arab admiration for Indian learning is summed up in the well-known work of al-Biruni (973-1050). In the words of Albert Hourani, al-Biruni 'is perhaps the greatest sustained attempt by a Muslim writer [of the Middle Ages] to go beyond the world of Islam and appropriate what was of value in another cultural tradition'. The Abbasid empire acquired knowledge from the Greco-Roman world on the one hand and India (and China) on the other, and thus became a transmitter of ideas from east to west and vice versa.

The writing of history was deeply influenced by Greco-Roman traditions. The first serious historical narratives by the Arabs began to appear in the ninth century. Al-Tabari (839-923), who is sometimes referred to as, the 'Livy of the Arabs', was among the first Islamic historians. His *Tarikh* is a history of the early Abbasid caliphate. Other prominent historians were al-Masudi, and of course al-Biruni.

The social transformation within the Abbasid empire due to the assimilation of Arab settlers with indigenous Iranian Muslims had changed the linguistic character of early Islam. Arab was no longer the only language spoken by the ruling elite. The language of a section of the elite, and indeed of the majority of the people, was Persian. Persian had evolved from Pahlavi and was written in a modified Arabic script. While Arabic was the official language and the language in which all religious and legal texts were written, Persian soon became the language for everyday administrative purposes and non-religious literature. Persian and Arabic borrowed freely from each other, which helped both languages to develop a rich vocabulary. Most of the educated people were bi-lingual. By the eleventh century a brilliant Persian literary tradition, which produced great poets such as Nizami and Sadi, had come into existence.

The conception of the caliphate, it should not be forgotten, was primarily a religious one. The Abbasid caliphs were absolute monarchs ruling over a territory, but they also regarded themselves as the leaders of the Muslim community. Whereas their power actually rested on force, they legitimized it in religious terms. This was not just a theoretical question. It had its roots in the actual struggle over the succession issue. Every stage in the history of the caliphate had been marked by disputes over succession ever since the death of Muhammad. The conflict had given rise to religious sects within Islam and each sect revolved around a particular claimant to the caliphate. Thus religious debates were closely intertwined with the question of succession. This helps us to understand why the Abbasids were so assertive about their religious role.

The Shiites were the most determined opponents of the Abbasids. Nevertheless they did not pose much of a challenge to the caliphate as they were an amorphous group with little political or military support (the ascendancy of Shiism in Iran is a much later development). The Abbasids had made use of Alid support to dislodge the Umayyads, but marginalized them as soon as they came to power. The Alids were aware of the fact that they were hardly in a position to take over the empire. After the debacle at Karbala in 680 the Shiites did not launch any concerted movement against the caliphate for the next two centuries or so. They quietly accepted the political rule of the caliphs, but refused to acknowledge their religious leadership. For them, political leadership vested in the family of Ali and Husayn. The descendants of Husayn were regarded as the religious leaders, or *imams*, of the Shiite community. The *imams* themselves did not participate in political activities.

After Husayn was killed in battle his son Zayn al-Abidin was declared *imam*. When Zayn al-Abidin died in 714 there was a dispute among his sons, Muhammad al-Baqir and Zayd. One group of Shiites accepted al-Baqir as the *imam*, while a small minority declared their support for Zayd. The followers of Zayd became a distinct sub-sect of the Shiites—the Zaydis. Another dispute arose (among al-Baqir's loyalists) after the death of Jafar al-Sadiq who had succeeded al-Baqir as the *imam*. Some of the Shiites recognized Musa al-Kazim, one of al-Sadiq's sons, as the *imam*. There were, however, some Shiites who claimed that al-Kazim's brother Ismail (who had predeceased Jafar al-Sadiq) was the legitimate *imam*. They believed that Ismail would reappear at the end of the world. The adherents of Ismail were designated Ismaili Shiites. The Ismailis developed into a very powerful sub-sect and in the tenth and eleventh centuries a dynasty with Ismaili leanings, the Fatimids, ruled over Egypt and Tunisia. The Fatimids assumed the title of caliph, challenging the political and religious authority of the Abbasid caliphate. Another section of the Shiites was loyal to Musa al-Kazim

and his descendants. The line of succession continued in al-Kazims's family till the end of the ninth century. Muhammad al-Muntazar was the last (twelfth) *imam* in this line. This section recognized twelve *imams* in all, from Ali to al-Muntazar, and therefore were (and still are) called 'Twelver Shiites'. The Twelver Shiites held that the *imams* after al-Muntazar were 'hidden *imams*', i.e. not visible to the world, and that they would be revealed at the end of the world.

The Shiites and their sub-sects (Twelvers, Ismailis and Zaydis) were a very small minority in the early Abbasid period. The majority of the Muslims accepted the Abbasids as caliphs and *imams*. Here it is necessary to point out that in political terms the Abbasid empire was primarily a West Asian entity by the ninth century. The empire had become so unwieldy that it became difficult to directly rule over territories which were situated at a great distance from Iraq and Iran. The western Mediterranean gradually slipped out of Abbasid control. Independent Arab dynasties were established first in Spain, then in the Maghrib, and finally in Egypt. A member of the Umayyad family succeeded in setting up an independent Arab state in Spain soon after the Abbasids came to power. The Umayyad dynasty ruled over Spain from 756 till the eleventh century. Soon after this an Arab dynasty (the Idrisids) established its rule over Morocco in 789. Tunisia was lost in Harun al-Rashid's reign and was ruled for a century by the Aghlabid dynasty. The Aghlabids were overthrown by the Fatimids in 909. The Fatimids first brought Tunisia under their control and then conquered Egypt which they ruled till the twelfth century. Of these dynasties only the Fatimids and the Umayyads claimed to be caliphs (the Umayyads of Spain declared themselves as caliphs as late as the tenth century). Otherwise, the Abbasids were nominally accepted as religious leaders of the *umma*.

Given the religious significance which was attached to the caliphate the Abbasids were eager to demonstrate that their state was based on Islamic ideals. They were guided by injunctions laid down in the Quran—in theory at least. The Quran outlined the fundamental principles of the

Islamic state but many provisions had to be properly interpreted and elaborated upon. Whenever there was a doubt it was resolved by finding out how the Prophet acted in a similar situation. The first caliphs, who were also companions of Muhammad, were personally familiar with the manner in which the Prophet had dealt with a particular problem. They constantly referred back to what was called the *sunna* or sayings and habitual behaviour of Muhammad. The *sunna* became a supplementary source of tenets for the guidance of the community. After the early caliphs these began to be formally recorded. The record of the Prophet's *sunna* was called *hadis* (usually transliterated as *hadith*). The *hadis* was based on oral traditions which were handed down by people who had actually heard the respective sayings or actions of the Prophet. A systematic attempt was made to classify and record the *sunna* as well as to authenticate it. The chain of oral transmission was subjected to rigorous examination and the reliability of the witnesses/transmitters was carefully evaluated. The study and compilation of the *hadis* developed into a separate theological discipline with its own methodology.

The actions of the community had to be in accordance with the *sunna* (and above all with the Quran) and the Abbasids projected themselves as the upholders of correct behaviour based on *sunna*. All those who conformed to the *sunna* acceptable to the majority (there was considerable scope for disagreement on whether or not a particular *hadis* or recording of the *sunna* was correct, hence the need for a consensus) were generally called Sunnis. Initially the term seems to have referred to all those who accepted the *sunna* or traditions endorsed by the majority and confirmed by the Abbasids. In view of the refusal of the Shiites to accept the authority of the Abbasids in religious matters they were considered outside the fold of the Sunnis. Sunnism eventually became a term for distinguishing the majority of the Muslims from the Shiites. In a very limited sense it denoted 'those who were not Shiites'. Hodgson remarks that when the term *sunni* is used to differentiate between Shiites

and Sunnis there is an element of inaccuracy because it is wrong to think that the Shiites do not follow the *sunna*. It is only that they have their own set of traditions, some of which are different from the *sunna* accepted by the majority of the Muslims.

Two major *hadis* compilations were prepared during the ninth century. These are the *hadis* collections of two great Islamic theologians, Al-Bukhari and Muslim. Bukhari and Muslim closely scrutinized all the *hadis* that were then available and prepared their massive compendiums. Almost simultaneously separate schools of jurisprudence which interpreted Islamic laws (*shariat*) in different ways (the basis of the law being the Quran and the *hadis*) were coming into existence. Four major schools of Islamic law developed in the early Abbasid period. These schools remain the four major Sunni *shariat* traditions down to the present day. The four schools of interpretation were those of Abu Hanifa (Hanafis), Malik (Malikis), al-Shafi (Shafiis), and Ibn Hanbal (Hanbalis). The Shiites had their own schools of jurisprudence. These developments laid the foundations of a complex legal system for the Islamic state.

Abbasid power began to decline by the end of the ninth century. Spain and the Maghrib had already broken away from the empire. Control over Egypt had also weakened. In the east, provincial governors were becoming semi-independent and eventually set up their own dynasties. Khurasan and the Central Asian territories of the Abbasids came under the rule of the Samanid dynasty with its capital at Bukhara (819-1005). The Samanids had been governors of the Abbasids in Khurasan. In Baghdad the Abbasids were divested of real power by the family of one of their military commanders, the Buyid family. The Buyids (who were Shiites) became de facto rulers of the Abbasid state from the middle of the tenth century onwards. By the eleventh century the Abbasid empire was taken over by a nomadic people from Central Asia, the Turks. The Turks in turn were displaced by the Mongols. Abbasid rule formally came to an end with the capture of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258.

Chapter Twelve

EARLY MEDIEVAL WEST ASIA

BY the beginning of the tenth century the unified Arab empire had been replaced by several independent Islamic states, some of which owed nominal allegiance to the Abbasid caliphs whereas others—especially the states in Egypt, the Maghrib and Spain—did not even formally acknowledge the Abbasids. In Asia, Abbasid power was increasingly confined to southern Iraq and some parts of western Iran while independent or semi-independent principalities came up in Iran, Central Asia, Syria, Yemen and northern Iraq. Many of these principalities were ruled by dynasties which were founded by provincial governors (e.g. the Samanids in north-eastern Iran) or military commanders. Most of the successor states in Asia were theoretically a part of the Abbasid caliphate but were actually independent political entities.

The decline of Abbasid power had started in the latter half of the ninth century. For the next hundred years or so, i.e. from the end of the ninth century to the end of the tenth, the core area of the Abbasid state (Iraq and Iran) was controlled by dynasties of Iranian origin. The two most prominent of these dynasties were the Samanids and the Buyids. The Samanids, whom we have already mentioned, ruled over Khurasan, Transoxiana (the Central Asian zone

which lies between the Oxus and Syr rivers and which was called Mawara al-Nahr by the Arabs), and portions of what is now Afghanistan. The Buyids (or Buwayhids) originated in the region of Dailam in northern Iran. Dailam is the name given to a small mountainous stretch along the southwestern coast of the Caspian Sea. The Buyids established their supremacy over most of Iran and eventually brought Iraq under their control. They ruled from Baghdad where the caliph was deprived of all his power.

Buyeh, after whom the dynasty is named, was an ordinary soldier in the Abbasid army. His sons became military commanders and seized power in the Fars area of central Iran. The Buyids were firmly entrenched in the cities of Isfahan, Kirman and Shiraz during the early decades of the ninth century. In 945 the Buyids captured Baghdad and became the de facto rulers of the Abbasid state. A grandson of Buyeh, who was given the title Azud-ud-daula by the caliph, unified the Buyid possessions in various parts of Iraq and Iran, c. 977 (members of the Buyid family had been governing different provinces as autonomous rulers). Azud-ud-daula is generally regarded as the most outstanding of the Buyids. Even though the Buyids were sympathetic to Shiism they did not oust the Abbasids. Nor did they themselves take on the title of caliph. They maintained a firm hold over the Abbasid caliphs and used them to legitimize their own power. Shiism and Sunnism coexisted under the Buyids.

The caliphs now ruled only in name. They were allowed to carry out a few symbolic religious functions (within Baghdad) but had no say in the civil administration or in military affairs. The Buyids ruled with the backing of the army. Initially they derived their main support from troops recruited from their homeland Dailam. Later they relied more and more on Turkish contingents. The Buyids assumed monarchical titles of the Sassanid kings such as *shahenshah* ('king of kings') and even claimed to be descended from the Sassanids. One of the salient features of the Buyid state was the

growth of the *iqta* system. *Iqtas* were assignments of land revenue by the state. The origins of this system go back to the first Arab conquests when a proportion of the land which had been in the possession of the Byzantine or Sassanid states (crown land) was confiscated and some of it distributed to powerful military commanders. It appears that the assignments made at this stage carried some sort of ownership rights (though these rights might not be properly defined). Another type of assignment was the grant of the right to appropriate the revenues of a particular area. It was this type of assignment which developed into the *iqta* during the eighth and ninth centuries. Albert Hourani remarks that, 'It could scarcely have been the intention of any ruler to alienate the tax permanently, or to give those to whom assignments were made a permanent control over the land'.

Iqta basically implied a right to the state's share of the produce. Theoretically speaking it did not give the assignee, termed *muqta* (or *iqtdar*), any ownership rights. The *muqta* was only entitled to appropriate the revenues which were due to the state from the area which was assigned. There could be considerable variation in the precise nature of the grant. Four distinct kinds of *iqta* had evolved by Buyid times: i) a large tract of territory might be assigned as *iqta* to members of the royal family or powerful officials who would govern the territory more or less autonomously; ii) the *iqta* might be an administrative unit of some size where the *muqta* would have the responsibility of looking after the administration and collection of revenue and at times even some military functions; iii) *iqtas* which were given in lieu of salary; iv) *iqta* grants which carried with them obligation to maintain a certain number of troops out of the revenues realized from the assignment. In the case of the last two kinds of *iqta* the *muqta* did not necessarily have a personal connection with his holding. The state would often appoint a separate set of officials to collect the revenue and give it to the assignee. A feature which was common to all kinds of *iqta* was that the *muqtas* frequently attempted to establish

hereditary ownership over their grants whenever they got an opportunity. This involved them in conflicts with the state on the one hand and the local landowning classes on the other.

The grant of *iqtas* for payment of salaries had become widespread by the beginning of the tenth century. The Buyids inherited and expanded this system. Salaries of officials were paid increasingly in the form of *iqtas*. The Buyid *muqtas* were normally not expected to furnish troops out of the revenues of their *iqtas* since the salaries of soldiers were disbursed centrally. However, all officials did not receive their pay in the form of *iqta* assignments. The Buyid state retained a portion of the land owned by it and did not alienate all its holdings. Yet the proportion of the surplus taken away by the state was somewhat more than under the caliphs. This large surplus sustained a ruling class in which military leaders had come to occupy an important place. The Buyid military aristocracy soon began to dominate the countryside as well. It should be emphasized that this aristocracy remained fully subservient to the Buyid rulers.

The territories of the Buyids were mainly confined to Iraq and Iran. In the east the Samanids maintained their presence in Transoxiana and parts of Afghanistan. In the west the Buyids had to contend with the Fatimids of Egypt. As we have seen the Fatimids first came to power in Ifriqiya (Tunisia) at the beginning of the tenth century. In 909 a person by the name of Ubaydullah al-Mahdi, who claimed to be a descendant of Muhammad's daughter and Ali's wife Fatima (al-Mahdi's genealogy remains uncertain), came to power in Ifriqiya after overthrowing the Aghlabid dynasty which had ruled the province since the latter half of the eighth century. Al-Mahdi declared himself to be the *imam* or the leader of the Ismaili Shiites. He and his successors assumed the title of caliph thereby directly challenging the authority of the Abbasids. The dynasty founded by al-Mahdi is referred to as the Fatimid caliphate. From their base in Ifriqiya the Fatimids began expanding into other parts of north Africa. They were initially unsuccessful in the western

Mediterranean where the Idrisids of Morocco (who too were Alids) and the Umayyad dynasty of Spain kept them in check. The Fatimids were however able to take advantage of the weakening of Abbasid/Buyid authority in Egypt. The Fatimid caliph al-Muizz (953-75) annexed Egypt in c. 969. In the west, the conquests of al-Muizz extended to Morocco. The Idrisids were expelled, and for the next few decades the whole of north Africa (Egypt and the Maghrib) was unified under Fatimid rule. The Fatimids managed to annex parts of Arabia and Syria-Palestine and thus were a serious danger for the Buyids in West Asia. In 970-1 Mecca and Madina were occupied. The two holiest places of Islam remained under the Fatimids till the end of the eleventh century. The Fatimids created a centralized state with a political structure which was similar to that of the Abbasid caliphate.

In 973 al-Muizz shifted the seat of his government to Egypt. Here he founded a new capital on the outskirts of Fustat. The new capital was named Cairo (al-Qahira, i.e., 'the town founded when the planet Mars was rising'). Within a few decades Cairo had grown into a major urban centre. In the first half of the eleventh century it had a population of about 500,000. It rivalled Baghdad as a great metropolis. The city contained several magnificent buildings including a grand mosque, the al-Azhar mosque built in the reign of al-Muizz. Cairo also became an important centre of learning. Further, it had a thriving international trade.

By c. 1000 the bulk of the seaborne trade between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean was passing through the Red Sea. There had been a shift from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea, partly due to the destruction of Siraf which had been the foremost international seaport of the Persian Gulf. The disturbed political conditions under the later Abbasids too had contributed to the decline of the Persian Gulf route. The Fatimids took advantage of this situation and actively promoted the Red Sea route. It may be mentioned here that since ancient times there had been a canal which linked the Red Sea with the Nile at a point

where the delta began. The Fatimids repaired and improved this canal so that goods could be carried easily between the Red Sea and Cairo. Cairo itself was both a centre of consumption and handicraft production (it was well-known for its silk textiles). Some of the commodities would be marketed in the capital—or goods produced in Cairo would be sent to the Red Sea via the canal. Otherwise commodities would be carried to, or from, the Mediterranean.

The unification of the entire Mediterranean coastline of Africa under the Fatimids gave a boost to long-distance seaborne trade. Egypt had an active trade with the Maghrib and Italian cities (Venice and Genoa) as well as with different parts of Europe. The Fatimids were on fairly cordial terms with the Byzantine and Frankish empires. Incidentally, a number of high officials in the Fatimid bureaucracy were Christians, some of whom rose to the position of *vazir*. The Geniza documents of the Jewish community of Fustat (Old Cairo), which we have already referred to in the previous chapter, provide ample evidence of the pivotal role played by the Jews of Cairo in the international trade between the Indian Ocean and West Asia. Commodities exported to India and south-east Asia included silk textiles, shawls, paper, sugar, crockery, glasses, soap and raisins. Areca nuts, Indian locks, brass bowls, almonds, perfumes, Chinese silk and porcelain were imported from the Indian Ocean.

The Fatimids were not only a threat to the political and military power of the Buyids in West Asia but they also undermined the religious authority of the Abbasid caliphate. It hardly mattered that the Buyids were Shiites like the Fatimids (it has been pointed out that the Buyids were not very firmly committed to Shiism). What was more significant was that the Fatimids claimed to be religious leaders of the entire Muslim *umma* and that they were actually able to enforce their authority over a very large part of the Islamic-ruled territories. On the one hand the ascendancy of Fatimids during the latter half of the tenth and the first half of the eleventh centuries completed the

process of Abbasid decline, and on the other made it difficult for the Buyids to consolidate their position.

Buyid power was considerably weakened due to various internal and external factors by the middle of the eleventh century. The economy was facing problems mainly arising from (a) the crisis of the Persian Gulf trade and (b) decline of agrarian production. Historians generally agree that the irrigation system of southern Iraq, which was so vital for the economic prosperity of the High Caliphate, was no longer in a good condition by the end of the tenth century. The Buyids failed to maintain the network of canals in this region. The neglect of the irrigation system caused silting of the canals, which in turn resulted in waterlogging. Overexploitation of the land, without any corresponding investment in better techniques, might have led to environmental degradation. Large tracts of land were covered with marshes and swamps. The area under cultivation had definitely shrunk by the beginning of the eleventh century. The Buyids responded with an increase in levels of taxation, but this only intensified the crisis. At this juncture the silver coinage was debased (i.e., its silver content was reduced), which further disrupted trade.

Although the Buyid state was considered to be a single entity, in actual practice various parts of the empire were ruled by different members of the royal family as separate semi-autonomous units. The Buyid territories which had been unified by Azud-ud-daula were gradually split up, under his successors, among different branches of the Buyid family. This naturally weakened the central authority and speeded up the collapse of the Buyids. In fact Buyid power had become so weak by the first half of the eleventh century that the Abbasid caliph al-Qaim (1031-75) was able to briefly reassert his authority in Baghdad. Nevertheless, the single most important factor which was responsible for bringing Buyid rule to an end was the rise of the Turks.

Since the latter half of the ninth century two closely related developments had been taking place in the territories ruled by the Muslims. One was the formation of armed

contingents comprising slave soldiers. The second was the penetration of Turks from Central Asia into West Asia and north Africa. To a large extent these two developments were interlinked because a significant proportion of the slave soldiers were of Turkish origin. The Abbasid caliphs, their provincial governors, and rulers of local dynasties had initially employed slave soldiers as personal bodyguards. The slave bodyguards were highly trained and had a strong sense of personal loyalty for their masters. By the tenth century slave troops (called mamluks) had become an indispensable part of the armies of West Asia, Egypt and the Maghrib. Some, though not all, mamluks were granted freedom following their conversion to Islam. Mamluk contingents were usually under the command of slaves who had been manumitted.

The nucleus of elite (i.e. the most well-trained) regiments, including personal bodyguards, was composed of slave soldiers. Several thousand Turkish military slaves were serving in the Buyid and Samanid armies in the second half of the tenth century. Moreover, provincial governors and high officials relied on slave soldiers to man their private armies. The mamluks emerged as a new factor in the politics of the region. Commanders of slave troops tried to assert themselves by constantly interfering in political and military matters. The mamluk contingents were often a destabilizing factor as they could be utilized in factional conflicts and for capturing power. Patricia Crone in her study of the phenomenon of slave soldiers (*Slaves on Horses*) has attributed the decline of the power of the Abbasids to their growing dependence on mamluks.

The distinctive feature of slavery in early medieval West Asia was the large-scale recruitment of slaves into the army. Many of the mamluks possessed administrative skills as well and were employed in civilian positions. Unlike ancient Greece and Rome, slaves were not extensively engaged in production. There might have been some slaves in mining or handicraft production. In any case, we can be certain that agrarian production was *not* dependent upon slave-labour.

This does not mean that there were no agricultural slaves. We have evidence of slaves being made to work on sugar plantations in Iraq. In 868 a major slave revolt broke out at Zanj in southern Iraq. Zanj had a number of sugar plantations which depended upon slave labour. The slaves were mostly Blacks. The Zanj revolt was spearheaded by Black slaves and lasted till 883. Generally, however, slave labour does not appear to have been widespread in agriculture. Besides being forced to serve as soldiers, slaves were also used for domestic work. The slaves should not be thought of as an undifferentiated class. While at one end there were well-trained warriors who fought on horseback, at the other end there were many more who performed only menial duties,

The expansion of the Abbasid empire beyond the Oxus river had brought it to the edge of the pastures of Central Asian nomads. These were lands which were inhabited by Turkish-speaking tribes. The Turkish tribes were essentially nomadic pastoralists. From the ninth century onwards we find references to several Turkish tribal confederacies—such as the Oghuz, Qipchaq, Qarluq and Qirghiz confederacies. Over a period of time small bands belonging to these confederacies had been moving into Transoxiana and northeastern Iran. Some of these bands (usually comprising a few families) came in search of pastures and lived a nomadic existence. However, there were others who began to settle down and mingled with the local population. Turks were to be found in both rural and urban areas. It would be wrong to assume that all Turkish soldiers were slaves. Several free Turks enlisted as mercenary soldiers. Nevertheless, it is true that the overwhelming majority of slaves were captured from the relatively backward Central Asian region lying across the Oxus. The conquests of the Abbasids and their successor states caused extensive dislocation, making the Turkish nomads easy targets for slave traders. Frequent wars too resulted in wholesale enslavement of many tribes. The interaction between Turkish nomadic tribes of

Central Asia and settled societies of West Asia accelerated the pace of change within the existing Turkish social formation. Some of the changes in the nomadic social formation were related to conflicts between tribal confederacies for control over pastures. The coming together of tribes in the form of tribal confederacies had given rise to new political structures. Simultaneously a Turkish warrior aristocracy had come into existence. This in turn led to social differentiation within the tribes. Raiding expeditions were carried out regularly into settled areas and the booty added to the surplus that was available to the aristocracy.

The expanding slave trade too acted as a catalyst for change. Many Turks were themselves engaged in this trade and earned large profits from it. Then there were Turks who enlisted as mercenary soldiers in the armies of the Muslim-ruled states. These soldiers helped to recruit others from their tribes, thereby forming compact contingents of Turkish soldiers in the armies of West Asian states. Finally there were the Turkish families or clans which had migrated to the settled areas. The migrants either became peasants in the countryside or took up various occupations in the urban areas. All these developments transformed Turkish nomadic society.

This background helps us to understand how the Turks were drawn into the process of state formation. The acceptance of Islam by most of the Turkish tribes (and the conversion of mamluks) provided the ideological framework for Turkish state formation. The Turkish tribes penetrated and eventually conquered large parts of West Asia. Together with their acceptance of the Muslim faith the Turks borrowed heavily from Iranian culture, or, to be more precise, the culture which was a synthesis of Arab and Iranian elements. The Turks in turn fused this Iranian culture with their own tribal customs. The social and linguistic character of Transoxiana, Afghanistan, Iran and large parts of Iraq was getting modified in the tenth and eleventh centuries due to the growing presence of the Turks.

C.E. Bosworth has noted that the prosperity of the early

Abbasid caliphate provided resources for buying and training Turkish slaves for a professional standing army which owed its loyalty to the ruler. The Buyids resorted to the grant of *icjtas* for raising contingents of Turkish mamluks. The recruitment of military slaves was further systematized by the Samanids. The employment of mamluks in the army first attained its full expression under them. The Samanid state became the nerve centre of the slave trade of Central Asia and Iran. This was facilitated by the proximity of the Samanid territories to the homeland of the Turkish nomadic pastoralists.

After c. 950 a few mamluk military commanders emerged as warlords in the Samanid state. One of these warlords was Alp-Tegin. Alp-Tegin was a Turk who had several mamluk contingents under him. With the help of his army he virtually became independent in the Samanid territories in Afghanistan. Ghazna was the main stronghold of Alp-Tegin. When Alp-Tegin died in 977 he was succeeded by his leading slave commander Sebuk-Tegin. Sebuk-Tegin founded the Ghaznavid dynasty which briefly created a huge empire, in the first half of the eleventh century, extending from eastern Iran to north-west India.

Sebuk-Tegin belonged to the Qarluq tribe of the Turks. He originally came from the area around the Syr Darya in Central Asia. He had been captured in a tribal conflict and sold as a slave. He became a slave soldier and rose to be a military commander in the Samanid army, serving under Alp-Tegin. Sebuk-Tegin became the successor of his master in 977. Ghazna was the capital of this state. Within the next two decades Sebuk-Tegin brought the southern part of the Samanid territories (the territories lying south of the river Oxus) under his control. Khurasan was also annexed by him.

Following the death of Sebuk-Tegin, his son Mahmud became the ruler of the Ghaznavid state (998-1030). It was in the reign of Mahmud that the Ghaznavid state reached its greatest territorial extent. Mahmud embarked upon a policy of aggressive expansion and extinguished the local dynasties which ruled over different parts of Transoxiana,

Afghanistan and Iran. The Samanids were finally overthrown in 999. The state of Khwarazm, lying between the Aral Sea and the middle Oxus, was conquered. The Buyids were confined mainly to Iraq. In the east, Mahmud invaded northern India and annexed parts of the Panjab.

In his struggle against the Buyids, Mahmud championed the cause of orthodox Sunnism. He attempted to legitimize his authority by portraying himself as a religious warrior who was fighting against the Shiite tendencies of the Buyids. He declared himself to be a supporter of the religious leadership of the Abbasids. He thus sought the sanction of the Abbasid caliph to uphold his own power. From the time of Mahmud we find a sharp distinction being made on the one hand between the ruler who wielded supreme political power and, on the other hand, the caliph who was seen as the religious head of the Muslim *umma*. It became customary to designate the ruler as 'sultan', which literally means 'holder of power'. Sultan was the title which was henceforth commonly used for kings as distinct from caliphs and *imams*.

Mahmud's rule marks the beginning of a new kind of monarchical state. In Mahmud's conception of kingship the sultan's authority was supposed to derive from the recognition granted to the sultan by the Abbasid caliph. In reality however the power of the sultan rested on force. Mahmud ruled as an absolute and despotic monarch. He pursued a policy of vigorous centralization of the state apparatus. The success of this policy was dependent upon having a large and well-disciplined army. Turkish mamluks were the core of Mahmud's army. For maintaining such an army Mahmud required access to sufficient resources. A very large proportion of the surplus was concentrated in the hands of a small ruling elite which owed its loyalty to Mahmud. This ruling elite was mainly of Turkish extraction but also included Iranian, Arab and some local elements.

Mahmud endeavoured to maximize revenue collection by increasing the level of taxation, especially in Khurasan. Most historians agree that Ghaznavid rule was a period of great hardship and suffering for the Iranian peasantry in general

and the Khurasani peasantry in particular. This made them quite unpopular in this region. Mahmud augmented his resources by frequent raids into India. The *iqta* system was expanded to provide for the support of troops. In fact under Mahmud *iqtas* came to be used more and more for military purposes. *Iqta* holders were supposed to maintain a specified number troops out of the revenues of the holdings that were assigned to them. This type of *iqta* became even more prevalent under the successors of Mahmud. Bosworth states that 'the Ghaznavids became the channel whereby the *iqta* system passed [from the Buyids] to the Ghurids and was firmly implanted in northern India under the Delhi Sultans and their successors'. The Ghaznavid state and the Turkish military aristocracy which owed allegiance to it undermined the economic and political power of the Iranian landowning class. This allowed the absolutist monarchical state to consolidate its position—a process which culminated under the Saljuqs who became the leading power of the region after Mahmud. Nevertheless, the Iranian bureaucracy continued to occupy a key position in the civil administration both under the Ghaznavids and the Saljuqs.

The Ghaznavid state did not survive intact for very long after the death of Mahmud in 1030. Mahmud was succeeded by his son Masud. Within a decade of his accession Masud had lost the empire created by Mahmud. Masud was himself deposed by his military commanders in 1040 and was replaced by his brother Muhammad. Thereafter the Ghaznavids were reduced to a minor local dynasty ruling over Ghazna and the surrounding area. The disintegration of the Ghaznavid empire was speeded up by the growing pressure of Turkish penetration into Transoxiana and West Asia. Bosworth is of the view that it was in the eleventh century that Turkish tribal movements into the settled regions of West Asia intensified. According to him the large-scale tribal movements of the eleventh century combined with the slower penetration of the preceding two centuries 'gradually changed the ethnic complexion of much of the northern tier of the Middle East'.

Within a short space of time the newly arrived Turkish groups displaced the Ghaznavids as well as the Buyids. In the 1030s the Saljuqs emerged as one of the leading Turkish bands which invaded the Ghaznavid and Buyid territories. The Saljuqs were a small clan of the Qiniq tribe which formed part of the Oghuz confederacy. We have already noted that the Oghuz were one of the prominent Turkish tribal confederacies. The Saljuqs had been carrying out raids in eastern Iran in the opening decades of the eleventh century. Their raids had become a regular feature by the time Mahmud died. By this time the Saljuqs had mobilized a fairly large army. It did not take long for the Saljuqs to overrun most of Khurasan. According to contemporary accounts, Ghaznavid rule in this area had become so oppressive that the residents of the leading cities of Khurasan themselves invited the Saljuqs.

The unpopularity of the Ghaznavids certainly made the Saljuq conquest of eastern Iran much easier. The inhabitants of Marv surrendered to them in 1037 and those of Nishapur in the following year. Then in 1040 the Saljuqs routed Masud's army at a battle which took place at Dandanqan lying to the west of Marv. The Ghaznavids were expelled from eastern Iran following their defeat at Dandanqan. This area now passed into the hands of the Saljuqs. Once the Saljuqs were firmly established in Khurasan they used it as their base for expanding westwards.

At this stage the Saljuqs were led by Toghril and his brother Chaghri Beg. After a series of military campaigns during the next fifteen years, the Saljuqs succeeded in bringing Iraq and western Iran under their control. In 1055 Toghril occupied Baghdad. The last Buyid king, al-Malik al-Rahim, was made a captive. Toghril became the ruler of Iraq and western Iran while Chaghri Beg ruled over Khurasan and the eastern part of the Saljuq kingdom. Chaghri's capital was at Marv. Chaghri Beg died in 1060 and was succeeded by his son Alp Arslan. Three years later Toghril died without leaving any male heir (1063). This was followed by a brief struggle for succession at the end of which Alp Arslan

established himself as the master of all the Saljuq territories (i.e. both the western and eastern parts of the state). Alp Arslan laid the foundation of a great Saljuq empire.

The second half of the eleventh century was the most glorious period of the Saljuq empire. The empire reached its zenith under Alp Arslan (1063-73) and his son Malik Shah (1073-1092). The territories which were ruled by the Saljuq dynasty included Transoxiana, Khwarazm, western Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria and parts of Anatolia. They also controlled Mecca and Madina and extracted tribute from some areas of Arabia. Whereas the centre of the Ghaznavid state was located in Afghanistan (Ghazna), the base of Saljuq power lay essentially in Iran. Marv in Khurasan was the main capital of Alp Arslan. Isfahan, lying at the heart of Iran, was the capital of Malik Shah. In other words the Saljuqs were much more firmly rooted in Iran than was the case with the Abbasids, the Buyids or the Ghaznavids. This imparted a specifically Iranian character to the Saljuq state.

The Saljuqs carried forward the monarchical traditions of the Ghaznavid state. The evolution of the saltanat which had begun under Mahmud of Ghazna reached its culmination under the Saljuqs. The saltanat, as we have noted, must be seen as a type of monarchical state in which supreme political and military authority vested in the sultan. The authority of the sultan was legitimized through the nominal acceptance of the religious authority of the Abbasid caliphate. Like the Ghaznavid state the Saljuq state was also highly centralized. The ruler was surrounded by an extravagant court. The splendour of the court and its elaborate ceremonial were intended to underline the majesty of the sultan. Court etiquette bore the imprint of Persian and Abbasid traditions.

The Saljuqs had a large standing army which was partly composed of mamluks. The army contained Turk, Mongol, Arab, Iranian, Greek, Armenian, and African soldiers. Saljuq military organization was closely linked to the *icfta* system. *Iqtas* were now specifically assigned for the upkeep of

troops.. The system of assigning *iqtas* was expanded considerably for this purpose. The practice of collecting revenue from the *iqtas* by a separate set of officials appointed directly by the central government was more or less given up. *Iqta* holders, or *iqtadars*, collected the revenue themselves and used a part of it for supporting troops and retained the rest of the revenue as their salary. The main taxes which accrued to the state were *kharaj*, *ushr*, *zakat* and *jizya*. There was a tendency for the *iqta* grants to be held on a semipermanent basis since the assignments were made for relatively long periods. This resulted in many of the *iqtas* being converted into hereditary private holdings (*milk* or *mulk*) by the twelfth century. The Saljuq *iqta* system sustained a powerful military aristocracy which was mainly of Turkish origin. This military aristocracy derived its authority from the sultan and was an important component of the ruling elite.

The Saljuqs maintained the fiction that they ruled with the sanction of the Abbasid caliph. Although the caliph had no real power, the sultans formally acknowledged his supremacy. The caliph had his own court at Baghdad. In their dealings with the caliphs the Saljuqs showed respect for the customary protocol. A military official called *shahna* was permanently stationed at Baghdad for representing the Saljuq ruler at the caliph's court. Of course, the diplomatic functions of the *shahna* were only secondary. The *shahna*'s main responsibility was to keep a watch over the activities of the caliph. It should be kept in mind that Baghdad, being the residence of the caliph, only had a symbolic value. The city had lost its political significance. In fact Alp Arslan did not visit Baghdad even once.

The Saljuq rulers continued with the practice of entrusting the civil administration to Iranian officials. This was all the more so because Iran was the focal point of the Saljuq state. The role of the Iranian bureaucracy assumed a new significance under the Saljuqs and this period may be said to mark the climax of the evolution of the early medieval Iranian administrative structure. The most

outstanding of the bureaucrats of this era was Abu AH Hasan Tusi, who is better known by his title Nizam al-Mulk. Nizam al-Mulk was the vazir of Alp Arslan and Malik Shah. The Saljuq state was as much the creation of the Saljuq sultans as it was the product of Nizam al-Mulk's towering personality. In the words of Bosworth the thirty years from 1063 to 1092 may also be characterized as 'the age of the great Vazir Nizam al-Mulk who typified the class of Iranian secretaries and officials upon whom the sultans relied'. Nizam al-Mulk was not only an administrator but was also an eminent scholar. He was the author of a famous work on statecraft entitled *Siyasat Nama* ('Book of Government'). This lays down general principles of governance and gives advice to kings and princes on a wide range of topics related to the manner in which they should rule.

Nizam al-Mulk was born in 1017 and had his early education in the Khurasani city of Nishapur. He began his career as an official in the Ghaznavid government. Later he took up service under the Saljuqs and became Alp Arslan's vazir. Nizam al-Mulk had been appointed vazir even before Alp Arslan became the ruler of the entire Saljuq empire. When Toghril died in 1063 Nizam al-Mulk assisted Alp Arslan in the struggle for succession. The success of Alp Arslan made Nizam al-Mulk even more powerful. He continued as vazir under Alp Arslan's successor Malik Shah. Nizam al-Mulk was murdered in 1092. It was a matter of coincidence that Malik Shah died a few days after his vazir was killed. Thus the assassination of Nizam al-Mulk and the death of the last of the Great Saljuqs (Toghril, Alp Arslan and Malik Shah) are referred to as the Great Saljuqs as distinct from the later Saljuqs) occurred at the same time. The close of the eleventh century brought to an end a yignificant era in the history of the Islamic state.

Nizam al-Mulk headed the civil administration or the *divan-i-vazir*. The *divan-i-vazir* had its own elaborate bureaucracy which included a chief secretary (*munshi*) and chief accountant (*mustaufi*). Nizam al-Mulk streamlined the training of officials by setting up a network of educational

institutions called *madarsas* which were intended to produce a class of civil servants who had acquired higher learning. These *madarsas* were financed by the state. The *madarsas* founded by Nizam al-Mulk were referred to as *Nizamiyyas*. The origin of *madarsas* can be traced to the tenth century. The earliest Abbasid *madarsas* were institutions for imparting instruction in Sunni religious tenets. *Madarsa* education was free. It has been suggested that initially the Abbasid *madarsas* were a response to Shiite propaganda carried out by the Fatimids. The Fatimids, it should be borne in mind, actively encouraged and financed institutions which were engaged in propagating Ismaili beliefs. By the Saljuq period *madarsas* were teaching a wide range of subjects which included Sunni theology, law, jurisprudence, history and political theory. The *Nizamiyyas* maintained very high standards and renowned scholars were brought to teach at these *madarsas*. Students were given liberal stipends in order to attract the best talent. The most famous *Nizamiyyas* were those of Baghdad (founded in 1067), Nishapur, Marv, Isfahan and Basra. The *Nizamiyyas* served the ideological purpose of evolving a uniform religious outlook for the Saljuq state. The officials who graduated from these institutions became the instruments for disseminating such an outlook.

The office of vazir owes its decisive development to Nizam al-Mulk. Under him the vizarat became a key element within the administrative structure of the medieval Islamic state. The vazir's secretariat looked after all aspects of the civil administration. This was a complex task which required considerable attention to intricate details. It was necessary to have a large official machinery to carry out the work of day-to-day governance. The Saljuq sultans, assisted by Nizam al-Mulk and his team, expanded the infrastructure which they had inherited from the Abbasids, the Buyids, the Samanids and the Ghaznavids. A word of caution is essential here. We should not exaggerate the level of centralization in a pre-modern state. Much of the routine administrative work of the state would have been taken care of at the local or provincial level. The arrangements at these

levels were frequently of an informal nature and the local officials were not always a part of the central bureaucratic apparatus. They might be village headmen, relatives of *iqtadars*, tribal chiefs, or persons with some local influence. Nevertheless Nizam al-Mulk did endeavour to make the functioning of the vazir's secretariat as comprehensive as was possible in the given historical situation. One might also add that Nizam al-Mulk's status was somewhat exceptional. There were very few vazirs who, after him, attained the preeminence which he enjoyed.

Nizam al-Mulk's tenure saw the evolution of yet another institution. This was the institution of *atabegs*. *Atabegs* were senior and highly trusted officials who were entrusted with the responsibility of training princes of the royal family, especially the heir apparent. We have seen that the practice of appointing such tutors goes back to early Abbasid times. But *atabegs* were a peculiarly Turkish phenomenon. More specifically, the atabegate as an institution was a product of the Saljuq period. The appointment of an *atabeg* was a much more formal affair than was the case with ordinary tutors. The designation of *atabeg* had social connotations as well. The *atabeg's* authority was similar to that of one's father. He could not be easily disobeyed. Under the Saljuqs the appointment of *atabegs* was not confined to princes alone. Young sons of *iqtadars* (i.e. royal heirs of large hereditary *iqtas*) too had *atabegs*. A.K.S. Lambton is of the view that the appointment of *atabegs* had an additional political objective. They were supposed to keep a watch over the princes and prevent the possibility of any rebellion. Nizam al-Mulk gave concrete shape to this institution when he was appointed *atabeg* of Alp Arslan's son and heir apparent, Malik Shah. When Malik Shah became sultan he made Nizam al-Mulk his vazir. Under the later Saljuqs the position of the *atabeg* was often misused. Many *atabegs* became regents with independent power and even founded their own dynasties.

II (a)

After the death of Malik Shah in 1092 there was a prolonged struggle over the question of succession. Sanjar, who was one of the sons of Malik Shah, was able to bring most of the Saljuq territories under his rule by 1118. By this time the authority of the Saljuq state had become quite weak in Iraq and western Iran. The conflict between rival claimants disrupted the unity of the empire and it was with great difficulty that Sanjar gained recognition as sultan of the entire realm. Sultan Sanjar's main base was in Khurasan where he had firmly established himself following the death of his father. Khurasan remained the nucleus of the Saljuq empire during the twelfth century. Sanjar ruled till 1157 but his last years were marked by violent upheavals caused by the irruption of Turkish tribes.

The hundred years from the death of Sanjar in 1157 and the capture of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 is a period with a complicated political history. Several dynasties, the Saljuqs being only one of them, ruled over different parts of West Asia, Transoxiana and Afghanistan. Not all the dynasties were Turkish. There was even a revival of Abbasid authority in southern Iraq. The Abbasids took advantage of the struggle within the Saljuq family to recover some of their prestige. The caliph al-Nasir (1180-1225) came to be regarded as a senior statesman in the politics of West Asia. He was often called upon to mediate in the conflicts between various groups. This does not imply that the Abbasids had regained their former authority. Their effective area of control was Baghdad and its environs.

The Abbasid caliphate and the numerous kingdoms of West Asia were destroyed by the Mongol invasions led by Chingiz Khan and Hulegu. Hulegu entered Baghdad in 1258 and killed the last caliph (al-Mustasim). Thereafter the Mongols became the dominant ethnic group in Central Asia and parts of West Asia. In due course they accepted the Islamic faith. The Turks continued to be a significant factor in the politics of the region. In Egypt the Fatimids ruled till

1171. They were ousted by a dynasty which had originally been founded by an *atabeg* in northern Iraq and which in the process of expansion had established itself in Egypt. One of the members of this family, named Salah al-Din (Saladin), became the ruler of Egypt. He overthrew the Fatimids and founded a new dynasty—the Ayyubids—which ruled over Egypt till 1252. The Ayyubids were in turn overthrown by a military aristocracy consisting of mamluk soldiers.

Although the twelfth century witnessed the decline and fall of the Saljuqs, this was a period of cultural efflorescence. The post-Sanjar period is the great age of classical Persian literature. A rich literary tradition had come into existence by the early eleventh century with the composition of a great epic entitled *Shah Nama*. *Shah Nama* was composed by Firdausi (c. 940-1020). This tradition was further enriched by the poetry Nizami. Nizami is regarded as one of the most outstanding poets in the Persian language. Nizami (c. 1140-1209) belonged to the city of Ganja in Azarbaijan (northern Iran). He is most famous for his romantic epics which remain popular down to the present day. One of his most beautiful epics is *Laili u Majnu*. This is a poem consisting of over four thousand lines. *Khusru u Shirin* is another well-known poem of Nizami. The other epics of Nizami include *Haft Paikar* and *Iskandar Nama*. Many of Nizami's epics were inspired by ancient Iranian legends.

The classical Persian literary tradition continued to flourish during the thirteenth century despite the dislocation caused by the collapse of the Saljuq empire and the Mongol invasions. Provincial courts became centres of hectic cultural activity. Out of the immense output of this period the works of two towering literary figures—Sadi and Jalaluddin Rumi—deserve special mention. Sadi (c. 1213-1292) belonged to the town of Shiraz in Iran. His two major compositions are *Bustan* ('The Orchard'), which is an epic poem, and *Gulistan* ('The Rose Garden'), which is written partly in verse and partly in prose and contains numerous anecdotes which are meant to highlight certain morals. The writings of Sadi are deeply imbued with Sufi mysticism.

Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-73) composed an encyclopedia of Sufism. This encyclopedia, known as *Masnavi-i Manavi*, is in verse and contains about 27,000 lines.

The foundations of natural science in the Arab and Iranian world had been laid during the early Abbasid period (see chapter eleven). The translation of ancient Greek texts into Arabic had stimulated the development of medicine, chemistry, mathematics and astronomy. We have noted that the Greek legacy in the field of medicine formed the basis of a new tradition of Arab medicine—the Unani system of medicine. Ibn Sina (called Avicenna by the Europeans), who was the most distinguished exponent of this system, lived at the close of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh centuries (980-1037). Ibn Sina hailed from Bukhara. He had made a thorough study of ancient Greek scientists and philosophers. Aristotle left a lasting impression on him. Ibn Sina's enduring contribution to science was in the discipline of medicine. He wrote a work which is generally known as *Qanun*, or *Principles of Medicine*. Through this work Ibn Sina popularized the writings of Hippocrates and Galen. *Qanun* incorporated the ideas of some of the most important Greek scientists. This became the standard textbook on medicine not only in the Arab and Iranian world but also in Europe. *Qanun* was translated into Latin and other European languages. It was the basic reference work on medical science in Europe down to the sixteenth century. Umar Khayyam, who was a contemporary of Nizam al-Mulk, was another outstanding scholar of the Saljuq era. Umar Khayyam, it may be noted, was politically opposed to the Saljuq state. He was a scholar with a wide range of interests. Though he is popularly known as a poet, i.e. as the composer of a form of Persian poetry known as *rubai*, he was primarily a mathematician who contributed to the development of algebra, geometry, physics and astronomy. Umar Khayyam was also a profound philosopher. There can be little doubt that Umar Khayyam was the most brilliant product of early medieval West Asian scholarship.

The decline of the caliphate and the shift in political focus from the caliph to the sultan created an urgent need for evolving a constitutional theory of the saltanat. The saltanat as a form of government was a relatively new phenomenon. Its beginnings may be dated to the latter half of the tenth century. The central dilemma of Islamic polity was that it had no provision for a monarchy. Yet, right from the time of the Umayyads the Islamic state had been monarchical in nature. As long as political and religious authority were merged in the person of the caliph the monarchical nature of the state did not pose a serious theoretical problem. The caliph was seen as exercising his political authority by virtue of his being the religious leader or *imam* of the Muslim community (*umma*). This situation no longer held true under the later Abbasids.

The rise of provincial dynasties like the Aghlabids in Ifriqiya or the Samanids in north-eastern Iran and Central Asia altered the position of the Abbasid caliphs. The rulers of these dynasties nominally acknowledged the overlordship of the Abbasids (the Samanids held that they were ruling on behalf of the caliph) and broadly accepted their religious authority, but were independent for all practical purposes. By the beginning of the tenth century northern Africa and Spain had ceased to be of much concern to the Abbasids because they had no role to play in the religious or political life of the Islamic societies of these regions. With the establishment of the Fatimid empire in north Africa and the firm grip of the Umayyads over Spain—both the Fatimids and the Umayyads claimed the title of caliph for themselves—Abbasid sovereignty was limited to West Asia.

In West Asia, the ascendancy of the Buyids decisively transformed the status of the caliphs. The Abbasids were now reduced to being virtual prisoners of the Buyid rulers. Nevertheless the Buyids did not remove the caliphs because they found it useful to continue with the tradition of recognizing the religious authority of the caliphs. This

helped them to legitimize their usurpation of political power. From the middle of the tenth century there was a clear distinction between the constitutional position of the caliph as the head of the Islamic state and leader of the *umma* on the one hand, and the actual ruler on the other hand.

It may be recalled that the Buyids used monarchical titles such as *shahenshah*. It is pertinent to note over here that the Fatimids and the Umayyads of Spain sought legitimacy for their power by taking on the title of caliph. Some scholars have wondered as to why the Buyids did not do the same. This might have been due to the fact that the Buyids with their Shiite sympathies felt themselves somewhat insecure in a region in which orthodox Sunnism was so deeply entrenched. Moreover the Abbasids were closely identified with the Sunni traditions of West Asia. Their presence had a symbolic value. The Buyids probably felt that it was not easy to disregard the sentiments which were attached to the Abbasids. As for the Ghaznavids and the Saljuqs, both of them projected themselves as champions and liberators of the Abbasids in the formative stages of their respective empires. This was one of the ways in which they tried to gain wider acceptance. Incidentally, once Saljuq rule had stabilized, sultan Malik Shah declared his intention of ousting the Abbasids. In the last year of his life (1092) Malik Shah had been planning to dislodge the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadi, with the aim of ending the Abbasid caliphate and possibly making someone else the caliph. The plan was cut short by the death of Malik Shah. What is significant is that Nizam al-Mulk was not in favour of such a move. This indicates that even at this point of time the Abbasids retained their symbolic prestige.

Whatever might have been the symbolic or nominal status of the caliphs, the fact remains that by the latter half of the tenth century they had almost no say in the affairs of the state. Real power was concentrated in the hands of the Buyids and the Samanids (there were a host of minor local dynasties as well), and subsequently in the hands of the Ghaznavids and the Saljuqs. A new type of Islamic

monarchical state—the saltanat—had come into existence. The sultan exercised absolute power but tried to legitimize his rule by seeking the sanction of the caliph. The reign of Mahmud of Ghazna marks the beginning of the mature phase of the saltanat as a form of government. Although Mahmud ruled like a despot over a vast centralized empire, he maintained that he derived his authority from the caliph. To contemporary observers and Muslim political theorists Mahmud represented a new type of ruler and the saltanat was seen as an innovative form of government. This form of government evolved further under the Saljuqs.

One thing that was immediately obvious was that despite the sultan's outward show of respect for the caliph, his power was absolute and that it ultimately rested on force. The sultan was a monarch in every sense of the term, except that he regarded himself (at least formally) as the deputy of the caliph. This was a contradiction which was not provided for in the existing writings on jurisprudence or political theory. Even before Nizam al-Mulk some Islamic scholars had tried to grapple with this problem. The first prominent thesis on the political theory of the saltanat appeared around the middle of the eleventh century. This was a work entitled *Ahkam al-Sultaniyya* ('The Principles of Government') written by al-Mawardi (died 1058). Al-Mawardi made an attempt to reconcile the historical reality of the saltanat with the Islamic concept of the state. He clearly stated that the authority of the caliph was supreme. The apparent aim of *Ahkam al-Sultaniyya* is to present grounds in favour of the authority of the caliphs. H. A. R. Gibb has pointed out that al-Mawardi was writing at a time when Buyid power was declining and the Abbasids were reasserting themselves, especially under al-Qaim (see above). It is likely that al-Mawardi was commissioned to write *Ahkam al-Sultaniyya* by al-Qaim. What is more relevant is that even though al-Mawardi strongly defended the supremacy of the Abbasid caliphate, he enunciated a theory for rationalizing the saltanat. The Ghaznavids were his main reference point for this (the Saljuqs had not yet come to

power). Al-Mawardi's principal argument was that while the caliphate was ordained by Allah, and therefore supreme, the caliph could delegate his power. The power that was delegated could either be limited or unlimited. The person to whom the power was delegated should exercise it in accordance with the *shariat*. Al-Mawardi justified the usurpation of power by force by stipulating that this type of power was valid if the usurper recognized the authority of the caliph. It is clear that he had someone like sultan Mahmud in mind while discussing this type of government.

In this context one should mention the contribution of Nizam al-Mulk. The basic framework of Nizam al-Mulk's *Siyasat Nama* is the saltanat. Whereas this was not a theoretical work it did contain a detailed exposition of the Saljuq saltanat. Given the influence of Nizam al-Mulk on Muslim contemporary scholars and his popularity with the Iranian bureaucracy it is hardly surprising that the *Siyasat Nama* helped to regularize, in theoretical terms, the saltanat as a form of government. Nizam al-Mulk emphasized the absolute nature of the sultan's power. In the final analysis this power was based on force. Nizam al-Mulk went so far as to state that the sultan did not need any constitutional sanction for his authority. The absolute power which was vested in the sultan was crucial for maintaining order in society and as such it had divine approval.

In the latter half of the eleventh century al-Ghazali (1058-1111), who was a leading authority on Islamic jurisprudence, published a series of treatises in which he formulated a detailed political theory of the saltanat. Al-Ghazali began with the proposition that from the point of view of the Islamic conception of the state all power was vested in the caliph by virtue of his being the head of the Muslim *umma*. The caliph was after all the successor of the Prophet. The caliphate as an institution combined three elements: i) the caliph represented legitimate succession to the Prophet; ii) the caliph exercised political authority; and iii) the caliph was the religious leader of the Islamic community. In an ideal situation all these three elements

should be concentrated in one and the same person. If the historical circumstances did not permit this then it was perfectly valid to divide these three elements among different persons. The caliph would then only embody legitimate succession from the Prophet and be the constitutional, though nominal, head of the state. Political and military power would be exercised by the sultan. The *ulama* or religious scholars would guide the community in religious matters.

We can see here that in al-Ghazali's scheme the role of the caliph has been marginalized. Al-Ghazali was more concerned with providing a legal justification for the sultan's authority. He dealt exhaustively with the saltanat as a form of government in his work *Nasihah al-Muluk*. According to him the sultan should recognize the supremacy of the caliph and should rule according to the *shariat*. But in actual practice the power of the sultan had no limits. Al-Ghazali argued that the sultan's power had a divine origin. The sultan was 'the Shadow of God upon Earth'. This made it obligatory for all his subjects to obey him completely. Any kind of rebellion, even if it was directed against a tyrant, was unlawful. Al-Ghazali's writings contain the most explicit statement on the absolute power of the sultan. These writings, together with the works of al-Mawardi and Nizam al-Mulk, were to function as the ideological basis of the saltanat as a form of government for a long time. With the abolition of the Abbasid caliphate by the Mongols in 1258 these writings acquired even more significance. Since it was no longer possible to maintain the fiction that the sultan was exercising political power on behalf of the caliph, theories which emphasized the independent and divine origin of the sultan's power were useful for legitimizing the Islamic monarchical state from the thirteenth century onwards.

APPENDIX

RELIGION IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

I

WHILE Rome was still a city-state, Roman religion was the religion of the original inhabitants of the city. The tribes settled in Rome had their own deities. Worship of mother goddesses and the forces of nature was prevalent. The gods and goddesses of the Romans were similar to those of the neighbouring Latin tribes. Traces of Etruscan influence are also discernible in primitive Roman religion. Once the city acquired a distinct identity many religious practices in Rome became uniform. It is possible to speak of a common religion of the city by the time the republic was founded. The supreme deity of the city was Jupiter who was regarded as the king of gods. Mars, the god of war, was another prominent god. A large temple dedicated to Jupiter was built on the Capitoline Hill in Rome. According to tradition the construction of the temple was undertaken around the time that monarchy was abolished. The temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill became the main sanctuary of state religion in the empire.

Roman religion was polytheistic. Many divinities were worshipped simultaneously. At the beginning of the republican period religion was already well-organized at the official level. Religion was an integral part of the state. Under the monarchy the kings had presided over state rituals. There were some sacred rites which only they could

perform. In their capacity as priests the kings bore the title *rex sacrorum*. After the overthrow of the Etruscan monarchy the religious duties of the kings passed on to a high priest who carried the same title. In the republic the *rex sacrorum* (sometimes just addressed as *rex*) had no political functions and was merely a religious official. He was selected from among the patricians and was appointed for life. The *rex sacrorum* was soon superseded by another religious official called *pontifex maximus* (see below).

The religious practices of the Romans consisted of ancient rituals which included prayers, festivals and sacrifices conducted by the state or by individuals. Sacrifice of animals was considered essential for propitiating the deities. While making a sacrifice, prayers had to be mechanically chanted in accordance with strictly laid down formulae. There were separate sets of prayers for different purposes. Major religious events were public occasions in which the people participated collectively. Public worship was organized by the state under the supervision of the official priests. The inhabitants of territories which were subordinate to Rome were expected to participate in these ceremonies.

Foretelling of the future was another feature of Roman religion. The Romans, like the Greeks, regularly consulted oracles to know about the future. There were priests who interpreted these oracles. Besides, there was a method of divination based on examining the flight of birds. This was known as *auspicium* (*auspicium* literally means 'bird-watching' and the English word auspicious is derived from it). There was a category of priests known as *augurs* who specialized in telling the future by this method. A group of official *augurs* was attached to the state and their advice was regularly sought by the government to predict the future. Another way of foretelling the future was by observing the stomach of a sacrificed animal because it was thought that this contained signs which would indicate whether or not the sacrifice had been accepted by the gods.

Religion was formally a part of the Roman state. The religious affairs of the community were regulated by

institutions which were components of the structure of the state. An official priesthood supervised all aspects of religion. The priesthood was elective. In the early republic official priestly positions were monopolized by the patricians. The *comitia curiata* played an important role in electing the priests. State religion was managed by a board of priests known as pontifices (singular, *pontifex*). At the beginning of the republican period there were three pontifices. By the time of Julius Caesar the number of pontifices had gone up to sixteen. Initially all the pontifices had been patricians. From c. 300 BC half the pontifices were elected from among the plebeians. The president of this board was called *pontifex maximus*. The *pontifex maximus* was elected for life. He could neither resign from office nor could he be removed from the position. The *pontifex maximus* took over most of the functions of the *rex sacrorum* whose post had become defunct by the end of the republic.

The *pontifex maximus* was the head of Roman state religion. This was one of the most prestigious positions in the state and carried some political authority with it. The post was much sought after by leading politicians in the late republic. Under the Second Triumvirate Lepidus had been elected *pontifex maximus*. Subsequently, when Lepidus was forced into political retirement he still continued to be the chief priest since he could not be divested of his office. Augustus was very keen to assume the title of *pontifex maximus* after he declared himself *princeps* in 27 BC. However he had to wait till the death of Lepidus (12 BC) before he could become *pontifex maximus*. This helped Augustus to further strengthen his authority by bringing Roman religion under his control.

The principal gods and goddesses of the Romans were Jupiter (also called Jovis); Juno, who was Jupiter's wife; Neptune, brother of Jupiter, and god of the sea; Venus, goddess of love, and the mother of Aeneas (Aeneas was the mythical ancestor of the Romans); Mars, god of war, and son of Jupiter; Pluto; Saturn; Minerva; Apollo; Mercury; Vulcan; Vesta; and Diana. Of these divinities Juno, Venus, Minerva,

Vesta and Diana were goddesses. Greek and Hellenistic religious beliefs moulded the evolution of Roman religion, especially from the third century BC onwards when Rome began its expansion into southern Italy and the Mediterranean. Roman divinities were identified with Greek gods and goddesses and thereby linked to Greek religious mythology. In the process, Roman divinities gained wider acceptability in the Mediterranean world. We may add over here that Greek culture and ideology, which itself had been considerably modified in the Hellenistic age, had a profound impact upon Rome during the middle and the late republic, i.e. in the period when the Romans were creating an empire. The classical Roman writers of the Augustan age (Virgil, Ovid, Horace) refashioned Greek and Hellenistic themes, giving a more harmonious look to Roman mythology.

The major Roman divinities all had their counterparts in the Greek pantheon. Jupiter was identified with Zeus; Neptune with Poseidon; Venus with Aphrodite; Minerva with Athene; and Diana with Artemis (see chapter seven). Roman gods were now thought of as dwelling on Mount Olympus. Apollo, who was one of the most popular Greek gods, had no Roman counterpart. The tradition of worshipping Apollo was introduced into Roman religion relatively late, probably around the third century BC. We have noted that the Dionysus cult had a large following in Greece. The worship of Dionysus or Bacchus—the god of wine—was widespread throughout the Roman empire also. Dionysian practices included ritual drinking of wine and dancing ecstatically. Women participated extensively in these rituals. Bacchus festivals at Rome appear to have become so unruly in the late republic that the state had to take measures to control them. These festivals probably attracted large crowds of poor and discontented people and the authorities might have been anxious to prevent outbreaks of violence on these occasions. Dionysus was at times identified with Sabazius, another god of Thracian origin. The followers of Sabazius consumed an intoxicating drink called *sabaia* (a kind of beer), instead of wine, as part

of their ritual. Otherwise there were many similarities between the two cults.

The dominant religion of the city of Rome, which was the official religion of the Roman empire in the sense that it was patronized by the Roman state, cannot be regarded as being the total religious experience of the Roman people. With the large-scale territorial expansion of Rome new trends appeared in Roman religion. This was inevitable given the heterogeneous nature of the vast empire over which the Romans ruled. The different societies which formed a part of this empire had their own religious beliefs. This was particularly so in the case of the eastern Mediterranean. Egypt, West Asia, Anatolia and Greece had highly developed religious traditions of great antiquity. It was unlikely that the people of this region would easily adopt Roman religion. On the contrary eastern religions overwhelmed the Greco-Roman world. Roman religion should not be regarded as a closed, static entity. It showed considerable openness in accommodating foreign cults. After all the majority of the inhabitants of the empire were non-Romans. The assimilation of their religious practices was crucial for the survival of the empire and Rome exhibited remarkable flexibility in this regard. In addition to the ready acceptance of Greek religion, elements of Egyptian, Syrian and Phrygian (Phrygia was a region located in central Anatolia) religions were incorporated into the Roman belief-system. We need to bear in mind the role of traders, sailors, soldiers and even slaves in the spread of new cults in the empire.

Among the earliest eastern cults which gained general recognition in the Roman empire were those of Serapis, Cybele and Atagartis. The worship of Serapis had its origin in Ptolemaic Egypt. The Serapis cult was a combination of the worship of Osiris and Apis. Apis was the sacred bull of Memphis. The priests of Memphis seem to have brought together the bull cult of Memphis and the popular cult of Osiris. The two were now worshipped as one composite deity—Serapis. Temples dedicated to Serapis were called

Serapiums. The Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt had extended official patronage to this cult and had built a number of Serapiums throughout the country. The Serapium of Alexandria was the most magnificent of all. Isis was also worshipped in the Serapiums. There were also separate temples dedicated to Isis (Iseums).

In the late republic Serapiums and Iseums began to appear in Rome and in other Italian cities. The cult of Isis posed such a big challenge to Roman religion that there are several references to orders being issued by the senate towards the end of the republic for the closure of Iseums which had mushroomed in the capital. The cult however, continued to thrive. Later, Augustus as part of his endeavour to promote Roman culture tried to suppress the Serapis and Isis cults at Rome. To some extent his campaign against non-Roman cults was a part of a conscious policy to eradicate all traces of Egyptian ideology and culture at Rome. Augustus's hostility towards Egyptian cults must be viewed in the context of his long struggle against Antony and Cleopatra and his desire to present himself as the saviour of Rome. Tiberius continued with Augustus's policy, but the Serapis cult survived and the Serapium of Alexandria remained one of the most sacred shrines of the Roman empire till the fourth century AD.

Another important eastern cult which flourished in the Roman empire was associated with a mother-goddess called Cybele. Cybele was a popular deity of Phrygia (Anatolia) where she was known as Kubebe. Cybele had a companion named Attis. Cybele was in fact the first eastern divinity to be officially made a part of Roman religion. Her adoption may be dated to the Second Punic War. The rituals associated with the worship of Cybele were performed by special eunuch priests. The Cybele cult was intimately connected with bull sacrifices. The rituals of the cult included bull sacrifices which were carried out in a sacred structure called *taurobolium*. This structure consisted of an underground pit which was covered by a platform consisting of a number of holes. A priest would occupy the

pit and the bull would be sacrificed on the platform which covered the pit. The blood of the sacrificed bull would flow down on to the priest through the holes in the platform. This symbolized a ritual purification. Bull cults and bull sacrifice had been widespread throughout the eastern Mediterranean and these appeared in various forms throughout the Roman empire from the time that the Mediterranean was unified. For instance Mithraism, which we will discuss later, was a West Asian religion which also had elements of the bull cult.

With the conquest of the Seleucid territories in West Asia Syrian cults penetrated the Roman empire. Atagartis was a prominent Syrian female deity. This cult had a large hereditary priesthood. The main centre of the cult was at Hierapolis-Bambyce in Syria. One of the most popular gods worshipped in Syria was a solar deity called Baal. Actually there were several distinct Baal cults. We have already referred to one of the Baal cults, the cult of Elagabal, which was patronized by the Roman emperor Elagabalus (AD 218-222). It may be recalled that Elagabalus belonged to the family of Julia Domna, the wife of Septimius Severus (see chapter nine). Julia Domna was a Syrian and Elagabalus himself had been the head priest of the Elagabal temple. During Elagabalus's short reign the Baal cult (in the form of Elagabal) became the official cult of the empire and this was one of the reasons for the unpopularity of the emperor among the conservative sections of the capital, leading to his assassination by the praetorian guards. Nevertheless, Syrian deities, especially Atargatis and Baal were venerated by Roman troops stationed on the eastern frontiers. These soldiers regularly prayed to these deities for protection. When the soldiers retired they carried with them the religious practices which they had adopted during their long stay in the east to other parts of the empire. This was one of the ways in which West Asian cults were disseminated over a large area.

At the popular level most of the inhabitants of the empire continued with their age-old religious beliefs. A host of gods and goddesses were worshipped throughout the

length and breadth of the territories ruled by Rome. The Greeks had their own pantheon, the Anatolian communities had their own deities, the ordinary Syrians, Mesopotamians, Egyptians and north Africans had their own gods and goddesses. Primitive tribal forms of worship prevailed in the outlying areas of the empire. In Palestine the Jews, whom we will discuss in some detail later, had their own very distinctive understanding of god and religion. The Phoenicians of Carthage worshipped a deity called Melqart. Melqart was the main deity of the Phoenician settlements in the western Mediterranean. In northern Europe the Celts of Gaul and Britain had their own tribal religion which is generally referred to as Druidism. Very little is known about Druidism. Druids were priests who performed the religious rituals of these tribes. Druidism centred around the worship of forces of nature and the rituals included sacrifices. For reasons which are not very clear the Romans ruthlessly suppressed Druidism in the mid-first century AD. The Germanic tribes had their own deities such as Woden and Thor. Woden was later identified with Mercury and Thor with Heracles (Hercules).

It would have been impossible for the Romans to regulate the religious life of each and every community in the empire. The state by and large allowed the people to carry on with their traditional forms of worship. Of course, the principal official religious events took place in the city of Rome. Outside Rome they were confined to areas of Latin cultural influence (primarily Italy), Roman and Latin colonies, provincial capitals, garrison towns, minor administrative centres, port-towns, and cities with a sizeable Roman population. The local elites and all those who were in some way or the other connected with the government were expected to participate in official religious functions at these places. There might at times have been an element of coercion in this. But as long as the people (or at least the leaders of local communities) nominally adhered to Roman official observances—even though this might be involuntary—and showed outward respect for state religion

they were on the whole left undisturbed. This was truer of the rural rather than the urban areas.

This does not mean that religious persecution was unknown or that the state did not from time to time try to define the parameters within which the religious activity of a community could take place. There were several instances where provincial and local officials were extremely intolerant in religious matters and conducted vigorous campaigns against those who did not accept the religion of the Roman state. Jesus Christ was the victim of one such official. Moreover, if the religious assertiveness of a community acquired political overtones, or if religious dissent was perceived as amounting to resistance against the state, the government was quite ruthless in dealing with such situations. We find this in the case of the measures taken against the Bacchus festivals and the Isis cult in the late republic; the elimination of Druidism among the Celts, and the suppression of the Jewish revolt of AD 66-70 in the principate. In the third century AD the religious outlook of a section of the Roman ruling class became increasingly narrow and uncompromising due to the growing crisis within the empire. The state sought to impose a semblance of ideological unity by imposing the official religion. However, as we shall see, this led to further problems.

With the establishment of the principate, state religion had acquired some new features. The Second Triumvirate had instituted the cult of Julius Caesar which received an impetus under Augustus. Julius Caesar was regarded as a god and there were temples dedicated to him. Augustus himself was deified after his death. The cults of Julius and Augustus Caesar served the purpose of legitimizing the monarchy. In the first century AD the city of Rome itself became an object of veneration. Rome was the symbol of the empire and the state projected the city as a divinity. Rome was worshipped as a goddess in her own right. The goddess Rome was associated with Venus, the mother of Aeneas. Venus had a special place among the state cults.

It was natural that Roman religion should reflect the

personal preferences of individual rulers. Augustus and Tiberius had forcefully rejected non-Roman cults. It may be mentioned over here that Augustus had been quite enthusiastic about Egyptian religion prior to his conflict with Antony and Cleopatra. It is well known that Augustus had initiated the construction of a Serapium at Rome when he was triumvir. All this changed by the beginning of the principate. Augustus and Tiberius strongly felt that non-Roman cults should be kept away from the core area of Latin culture. The successors of Tiberius found it difficult to carry on with this policy due to the growing popularity of eastern religious beliefs in the empire. From the time of Caligula onwards Egyptian, Anatolian and Syrian deities were being patronized by the emperors. Some of the emperors took part in Isis festivals. Vespasian prayed at the temple of Serapis in Alexandria when he was declared emperor. Elagabalus introduced the public worship of Baal in Rome. In the third century AD various solar deities became popular with the emperors. There was a tendency to identify the emperor with the sun. Baal was a solar deity. Mithraism, which had a large following in Rome, also contained elements of sun worship. The diverse tendencies of the emperors encouraged the growth of a more composite religious outlook in the Roman ruling class.

II

The creeds of West Asia began making inroads into the empire after the Romans became a territorial power in the region. Religious movements in Iran and Mesopotamia affected the course of Roman religion from the second century AD onwards. It is therefore necessary to outline some of the salient features of Iranian religions even though this area was not a part of the Roman empire. In the Persian empire of the Achaemenids (i. e. the empire founded by Cyrus and Darius I in the sixth century BC which was later destroyed by Alexander the Great) there were two major religions: Mithraism and Zoroastrianism (or Mazdeism). The

Mithra cult had its origins among the early Indo-European tribes. There are historical references to Mithra in documents of the fourteenth century BC. Mithra was one of the deities worshipped in Anatolia in Hittite times. The Mithra cult spread to northern Mesopotamia and Iran with the Indo-Iranian tribes.

As Mithraism evolved it absorbed several new ideas and formulated its own worldview. Mithra was seen as a god who represented light and was supposed to be engaged in a struggle against darkness. One of the central concepts of the religious philosophy of Iran, which permeated both Mithraism and Zoroastrianism, was that the universe is ruled by two opposing supernatural forces. On the one hand are the forces of light and goodness, and on the other are the forces of darkness and evil. These two forces are engaged in a perpetual contest. This philosophical conception of the world is referred to as 'dualism'. There will come a time when the forces of darkness will be finally defeated. Till then we can strengthen the forces of light by being on the side of good. This can be achieved through appropriate rituals and good deeds. In Mithraism, Mithra symbolizes light. Mithra, as the embodiment of light, was also conceived of as a solar deity, i.e. as a sun god. There was an elaborate set of rituals which was connected with this cult. The cult had a large following in Iran and Mesopotamia by beginning of the Achaemenid period. However Mithraism declined under Darius I. Darius gave official patronage to Zoroastrianism and made it the state religion.

There was a revival of Mithraism in the Hellenistic age. The new Mithraism was somewhat different from its earlier form. The devotees of Mithra now constituted a kind of secret society. The god was not worshipped publicly nor were the rituals of the cult performed in the open. Members were admitted into the cult by performing certain secret rituals. The cult had its own priesthood which supervised the sacred ceremonies of the cult at Mithraic places of worship. Women were excluded from the cult. Mithraism was fused with the bull cult and bull sacrifices were a key

aspect of its secret rituals. In Greco-Roman iconography Mithra is invariably depicted as a bull-slayer. Bull cults, as already mentioned, were prevalent throughout the eastern Mediterranean, Anatolia and West Asia from a very remote period. The sacrifice of bulls was linked with fertility rites. The sacrifice had the power to fertilize.

Soldiers who served in the eastern armies were among the earliest Roman converts to Mithraism. Mithra became a special deity of the Roman army and the troops were strongly attached to it. Besides, the cult already had followers among the local inhabitants of Roman territories in West Asia. In the second century AD Mithraism had spread to the western provinces. Here its devotees mainly belonged to the elite and the middle class in urban areas. The cult's secret places of worship, called Mithraeums, appeared all over the empire. Archaeological excavations have brought to light nearly fifty Mithraeums in Rome; eighteen Mithraeums in Ostia; several Mithraeums in Alexandria and Carthage; and a large Mithraeum in London. This is an indication of the extent to which Mithraism had become part of the religion of the Roman empire.

In Iran itself Mithraism was overshadowed by Zoroastrianism. The rise of Zoroastrianism (which is more familiar to the people of the Indian subcontinent as the Parsi religion), goes back to the sixth century BC when the legendary prophet Zarathustra preached the main tenets of this religion. Zarathustra's teachings provided the main framework of Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrianism included some of the earlier religious traditions of the Indo-Iranian people. The Zoroastrian belief was that the universe is governed by two contending powers, Ahuramazdah who is the god of truth and Ahriman who symbolizes evil. A cosmic struggle is constantly going on between the two. Ahuramazdah is worshipped as the representative of light and good. Zoroastrianism is also referred to as Mazdeism. Zoroastrian temples had a sacred fire which was kept burning all the time. Fire was a symbol of light in the struggle against darkness. Zoroastrian rituals were

conducted by a hereditary priestly class known as the Magi. The sacred book of the Zoroastrians was the *Zend-Avesta*.

Under the Seleucids Zoroastrianism suffered a setback. In the Parthian territories Zoroastrianism coexisted with Mithraism. In this period both religions enriched each other through an exchange of ideas. Zoroastrianism was restored as the state religion under the Sassanids. Initially a new dualist religion called Manichaeism, which combined elements of Mithraism, Zoroastrianism and early Christianity, became popular in the Sassanid empire. We will discuss Manichaeism later in the context of the rise of Christianity. At the end of the third century AD Zoroastrian Mazdeism was made the state religion of the Sassanid empire. The significance of Zoroastrianism from the point of view of Roman religion lies in the fact that Roman possessions in Syria, northern Mesopotamia and parts of Armenia had a sizeable population of Zoroastrians. Secondly, Zoroastrian ideas influenced some of the religious trends of the empire, particularly Manichaeism which for some time was one of the most powerful religious movements in the empire.

III

The semi-arid strip of land which lies just south of the Syrian coast has a unique place in the religious history of the Roman empire. This narrow area extending from the southeastern corner of the Mediterranean to the northern tip of the Red Sea was called Palestine (present-day Israel-Palestine). Palestine is bound by the Jordan River and the Dead Sea in the west. It was one of the territories conquered by Alexander the Great. Following the death of Alexander, Palestine became a part of the Ptolemaic kingdom of Egypt. The Seleucids made several attempts to dislodge the Ptolemies from this area. In 200 BC Antiochus III annexed Palestine to the Seleucid kingdom. The Seleucids ruled over it till 63 BC. When the Romans put an end to the Seleucid state and occupied Syria, Palestine was absorbed into the Roman empire.

Palestine was the home of two major religions: Judaism and Christianity. In the fourth century AD Christianity became the official religion of the Roman state. Judaism, which was the dominant religion of Palestine before Christianity, provides the historical backdrop to the birth of Christianity. We must therefore begin with a discussion of Judaism before examining the rise and spread of Christianity in the Roman empire.

Judaism is one of the oldest living organized religions in the world. Its beginnings go back to movements of Western Semitic tribes in West Asia c. 2000. According to tradition Judaism was founded during the course of a migration of tribes led by Abraham. Circa 1800 these tribal people, known as Israelites, were travelling from Mesopotamia to Syria-Palestine. They had recently been unified and this unity was expressed in the form of their accepting a common religion. When the Israelites were passing through northern Mesopotamia they acknowledged the existence of one true god, Yahweh (Jehovah). At Haran Abraham is supposed to have entered into an agreement with Yahweh to give up the worship of idols and of all deities. Henceforth Yahweh, the one and only divine power, would be worshipped. In return Yahweh regarded the Israelites, or the Jews, as his chosen people. They were promised the occupation of land in Palestine. The story of this journey from Mesopotamia is contained in the Book of Genesis which is a part of the Old Testament of the Bible.

The Israelites subsequently migrated to Egypt due to the harsh environment of Palestine. Here they dwelt for several centuries. Jewish settlements flourished in the Nile Delta. The Israelites had to later leave Egypt when one of the pharaohs (pharaoh Ramesses II, 1304-1237) began to persecute them. The story of the Jewish exodus from Egypt is vividly narrated in the Old Testament. The Israelites evacuated Egypt and migrated to Palestine. They were led by Moses and wandered for almost forty years before reaching their destination. It was during this migration that the Israelites formulated their basic laws. These laws, known

as the Ten Commandments, constitute the earliest legal framework of the Jewish community. They were divinely revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai. The Ten Commandments helped the Israelite clans to unify themselves into a nation. Moses died on the way to Palestine. His successor Joshua finally succeeded in leading the Israelites into Palestine c. 1200 BC. Recently a leading Israeli archaeologist, Zev Herzog, has questioned the historicity of the Jewish immigration to and exodus from Egypt. He has suggested that the Israelites were one of the Semitic nomadic tribes which had lived in Syria-Palestine for several centuries. They had very close ties among themselves. The clans (*mishpahah*) met regularly for feasts and rituals. These ties were strengthened when they accepted a common monotheistic religion. Religion formed a common bond between these tribes and created the conditions for state formation.

The stretch of land on which the Israelites settled was at that time referred to as Canaan. It got its name from the Semitic people known as the Canaanites who occupied the tract from the Syrian coast to Palestine. The Phoenicians were a branch of the Canaanites. Phoenician commercial settlements dominated the coastline. Phoenician and Israelite expansion in this area, between c. 1200 and 1000 BC, was closely interlinked. The Israelites lived in the proximity of the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon. At one point of time they were politically aligned with Hiram, the Phoenician ruler of Tyre. The Israelites helped the traders of Tyre to extend their trade links. The association with Phoenician commerce speeded up state formation and class differentiation among the Israelite tribes. The Jewish tradition tells us that when the Israelites settled in Canaan in c. 1200 BC they were divided into twelve tribes. The tribes were ruled by priest-chiefs or Judges. Given the poor soil conditions of area, trade was crucial for augmenting the surplus. Trade led to the growth of Jewish urban centres.

Canaan was inhabited by numerous tribes which were constantly engaged in a struggle for enlarging their

territories. The conditions in Canaan remained unsettled because tribes were all the time moving into or out of this passage lying at the junction of Egypt, Syria and Mesopotamia. The main opponents of the Israelites in their struggle for supremacy were the Philistines. When the Hittite empire was disrupted by tribal movements c. 1200 BC, some of the dislocated people of the eastern Mediterranean settled in Canaan. One of these tribes were the Pelest (*Plishtim* in Hebrew). The Pelest, who are commonly referred to as Philistines in ancient literature, established themselves in Canaan and gave their name to this tract—Palestine (for the sake of convenience and in order to avoid confusion we will henceforth use this name while speaking of the entire area generally). The struggle between the Israelites and the Philistines is a recurring theme in Jewish literature pertaining to the period after the exodus.

In the period between c. 1000 and 931 BC the foundations of an Israelite state were laid. Circa 1020 BC the kingdom of Israel was formed by king Saul. Saul was succeeded by David in c. 1000 BC. Saul and David achieved notable victories over the Philistines. They developed an administrative machinery for governing the area occupied by the Israelites. So far the Israelites had mainly been unified by their religion. They were now constituted into a state. Circa 960 BC David was succeeded by king Solomon. Solomon made Jerusalem the capital of the Israelite kingdom. In his reign Jerusalem became a prominent urban centre. Solomon built a large Jewish temple at Jerusalem, making the city the focus of the religious life of the community. Solomon is believed to have lived very ostentatiously. The lavish lifestyle attributed to him in legends might partly be an exaggeration, but it does indicate that by this time there was considerable social differentiation among the Israelites and that the process of their transition from tribal to class society had been completed. Disparities of wealth indicate that the ruling class was able to appropriate a large surplus.

After Solomon's death in 931 BC the kingdom of Israel could not remain united. The conflicts among different claimants to the throne were resolved by a partition of the kingdom. The kingdom was divided into two separate kingdoms: the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Jerusalem now became the capital of Judah. In 722 BC Israel, i.e. the northern kingdom, was invaded and by the Assyrians of Mesopotamia. Israel was subjugated by the Assyrians, although Judah survived. Then in 586 BC the Babylonian rulers of Mesopotamia invaded Palestine. This time Judah was conquered and Jerusalem was destroyed. The successive invasions of the Assyrians and the Babylonians wiped out the states created by the Israelites. The Babylonian conquest was a serious disaster for the Jews. The Israelite settlements were broken up and thousands of Jews were forcibly deported to Babylon. Many others sought refuge in Egypt and other parts of the Mediterranean. This dispersal of the Jewish population is referred to as the Diaspora.

The Diaspora changed the character of Judaism. The Jewish people were no longer concentrated in one place but were scattered in various countries. New Jewish settlements arose in these countries. The Jewish communities tried to safeguard their separate religious identity through strict adherence to their distinctive beliefs and practices. It was in this period that the traditions which had evolved in the previous centuries were gathered together and systematized. The Jews who had been banished to Babylon constituted the core of the followers of Judaism. These Babylonian Jews were responsible for giving concrete shape to Jewish religious doctrines while they were living in exile.

Judaism was one of the earliest religions which was uncompromisingly monotheistic. Only one supreme god, Yahweh, is worshipped by the Jews. Judaism was strongly opposed to idol worship and strictly prohibited many of the practices, as for instance human sacrifice, which were then prevalent in the region. In the covenant (formal agreement) which Abraham is supposed to have made with god, the main emphasis was on the exclusive belief in Yahweh. The

monotheism of Judaism was reiterated by Moses when he was leading the Israelites out of Egypt. It is believed that Moses, whom the Jews regard as their prophet and lawgiver, symbolically smashed the figure of a golden calf as a token of the absolute rejection of idol worship. It is likely that idol worship did not completely disappear among the Israelites even after they had founded a monarchical state in Palestine. Some of the early tribal rituals coexisted with the worship of Yahweh. There is evidence to suggest that there was a revival of the worship of local deities in the post-Solomon era. For example, there are references to the veneration of Baal in the reign of Ahab, king of Israel 873-52 BC. Strong measures were taken to suppress these practices after Ahab. In all probability it was in the period after the Diaspora that the entire Jewish community became firmly committed to monotheism.

The *Torah* is the sacred book of the Jews. It contains the principal teachings of the prophets, the historical traditions of the Jews, and the laws revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai (the Ten Commandments). The *Torah* was compiled and written down over several centuries, between c. 1000 and 500 BC. It was given final shape around 450 BC. The book consists of five parts and is also called the Pentateuch. Incidentally, the Pentateuch is the first portion of the Old Testament of the Bible. The civil and canonical laws of the Jews are gathered in the *Talmud*. The early literature of Judaism is written in the Hebrew and Aramaic languages.

Judaism is an entire way of life. There are elaborate rules for guiding believers in their daily routines. There is a lot of emphasis on family ties. Males undergo circumcision as a mark of their belonging to the Jewish community. The forms of worship are basically quite simple in Judaism. The followers assemble in synagogues, which are places where the faithful read the holy scriptures. Anyone may read aloud from the holy books at these assemblies. No specialist priests are required. There are no complicated rituals which might require a sect of priests. Historians have pointed out that the development of a written literature which was accessible to

all Jews, and the collective reading of scriptures, played a significant role in unifying the community.

Babylonian rule over Palestine was brought to an end by the rise and expansion of the Persian empire of the Achaemenids. The area now came under the Persians. The Achaemenids pursued a liberal and tolerant religious policy. The diverse communities which inhabited the vast Persian empire enjoyed the freedom to worship according to their respective beliefs. When Cyrus defeated the Babylonians in 539 BC the Jews were allowed to settle in Jerusalem once again. It was soon after this event that the Jews built their Second Temple at Jerusalem. Palestine witnessed a revival of Judaism. The final version of the *Torah* was put together in this period. Jewish communities of both Babylon and Jerusalem contributed to the preparation of the text in its completed form. Mesopotamia, it may be mentioned, remained an important centre of Judaism with a large Jewish population residing in Babylon.

In the Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods Judaism struck deep roots in West Asia, especially in Palestine. Palestine was governed by Israelite chiefs who acknowledged the supremacy of the Achaemenids, and later, of the Ptolemids and Seleucids. Jerusalem was the main political and religious centre of the Jews. However, the politics of the region underwent a decisive change with Roman expansion into the eastern Mediterranean. Roman campaigns against the Seleucid king Antiochus III (see chapter eight) undermined the authority of the Hellenistic kingdom of Syria. A full-scale Jewish revolt broke out against the Seleucid state in 167 BC. The immediate provocation for this revolt was the attempt of Antiochus IV (also called Antiochus Epiphanes), who became king in 175 BC and was the son of Antiochus III, to suppress Judaism. This was part of Antiochus IV's policy to vigorously Hellenize the Seleucid kingdom. Such a policy had serious implications for Palestine because Antiochus attempted to forcibly impose Greek high culture on this relatively backward area. Moreover, Roman demands for tribute from

the Seleucids resulted in a bigger financial burden being placed on the people. The poorer economy of Palestine could not bear the increased taxation and this added to the mounting resentment against Seleucid rule.

The Jewish revolt against Antiochus IV was led by Judas Maccabaeus, a leading Jewish priest of Jerusalem. The revolt lasted till 164 BC and the followers of Maccabaeus (Maccabeans) successfully resisted the cultural and religious onslaught of the Seleucid state. The Maccabeans entered into an alliance with the Romans in their struggle against the Seleucids. This was an opportunity that the Romans quickly utilized to make further inroads into the region.

Antiochus IV died in 163 BC, but the Maccabean struggle for independence continued. The family of Maccabaeus took advantage of the declining power of the Seleucids to establish an independent state of Judah (c. 145 BC). The Maccabaeus family became the high priests of Jerusalem and autonomous rulers of Palestine. To remain in power they had to make compromises both with the Romans and the Seleucids. After the Roman conquest, Palestine became a client-state of Rome. It was initially governed by pro-Roman Jewish priest-kings, and was later placed under Roman prefects after a new province of Judaea was carved out in Palestine in AD 6. The priests were allowed some degree of autonomy in matters relating to the Jewish community.

In the century and a half following the Maccabaeus revolt, the Jews split up into a number of sects. These divisions were based partly on doctrinal differences among the sects. At the same time they reflected a growing divergence between the upper class urban Jews who had become part of the provincial elite and the less affluent Jews who lived on the margins of urban society. The Maccabeans themselves started as a sect which did not submit to Antiochus IV, even though some other Jews had accepted Hellenization. After c. 145 BC they were looked upon as having surrendered the independence of the Jewish state by entering into unscrupulous alliances to gain political power. The Maccabeans felt that it was impractical to prolong the

conflict with the Seleucid authorities. The Jews did not have the resources for sustained fighting over a long period of time. A compromise, it was argued, was better than the elimination of the entire community. Later, an offshoot of the Maccabeans, called the Sadducees, consolidated their hold over the Jewish state by accepting the overlordship of the Romans. The Sadducees were the wealthy elite among the Jews who dominated the economy by their control over land and trade. This was the group which was in power when Jesus Christ preached in Palestine.

Another sect were the Pharisees who had a large following in the early principate. The Pharisees were critical of the shape which the Jewish state had taken after the Maccabean revolt. They accused the religious leaders of Jerusalem of corruption and of having betrayed the cause of true Judaism. But unlike some other sects they did not opt out of the settled Jewish community. They resided in Jerusalem and its neighbourhood and were an integral part of the social and economic life of the city. The views of the Pharisees prevailed among the common people who were divorced from the ruling class. The Pharisees were of the opinion that the Jews could be truly religious by literally following the rules laid down in religious texts. The Sadducees on the other hand argued that the Pharisees were being overenthusiastic in the attempt to regulate every aspect of existence for which purpose they had created hundreds of new rules which had no basis in holy scriptures. In the long run the Pharisees also tended to conform to the existing social and political system. In religious terms what distinguished them were their more complicated rituals. Their notions eventually became the most widespread among the Jews. Whereas the religious life of the Sadducees revolved around the Temple of Jerusalem, the Pharisees promoted the growth of local synagogues for holding religious assemblies. These were the Jews with whom the later followers of Jesus Christ had a prolonged conflict.

There were other Jewish sects which were opposed to any compromise whatsoever. Among them were Jews who

propagated a more puritanical form of Judaism. The most prominent puritanical sect were the Essenes, who opposed both the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Essenes preached simplicity/ had an austere lifestyle, shared their belongings and laid emphasis on being virtuous. Their principles of asceticism and celibacy led them to retreat from settled rural and urban societies. They usually lived in surrounding hilly tracts, often residing in caves. Here they formed isolated communities of their own. As we shall see, there are many similarities between Christianity and the doctrines of the Essenes.

Roman rule over Palestine and growing Roman exactions sharpened the contradictions among the Jews. There were some sects, like the fanatical Zealots, which advocated a consistent armed struggle against the Romans until the Jewish state became independent. Nevertheless, despite occasional tensions, most of the Jews were reconciled to Roman rule by the early principate. These included the Jews living in Palestine and in settlements located in different parts of the empire. The main cause of the discord between the Jews and the Roman authorities was the refusal of the Jews to recognize Roman gods or to participate in official Roman worship. Over a period of time the Roman state accommodated the monotheism of Judaism. The Jews were accepted as a separate community with its own observances.

There were a few occasions when the Roman state launched all-out campaigns against the Jews. This happened in situations where the authorities were apprehensive of organized resistance against the Roman state. The most serious armed conflict between the Jews of Palestine and the Romans took place in AD 66-70. This is known as the First Jewish Revolt. The revolt was suppressed by Vespasian (see chapter nine). Vespasian's son, Titus, occupied Jerusalem and destroyed the sacred Temple of the Jews. After AD 70 the semi-autonomous Jewish state ceased to exist as a separate political entity. Henceforth the Jews were primarily a religious, rather than political, community in the empire. The second upheaval was the Second Jewish Revolt of AD

132-5. The revolt was sparked by Hadrian's proposal to establish a Roman colony at Jerusalem and reorganize the administration of the province. The rebellion spread to Egypt (Alexandria had a large Jewish settlement) and Africa. For some years after AD 135 both sides remained mutually suspicious of each other. By the time of Antoninus Pius normal relations had been restored. We hear of no major incidents of persecution in the third century AD. In the following century things became difficult for the Jewish communities after Christianity was adopted as the state religion of the Roman empire.

IV

We have seen the historical conditions in Palestine at the beginning of the principate. Christianity had its origins in this milieu. Jesus Christ, whose teachings form the basis of Christianity, lived in the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius. He was born at Bethlehem, near Jerusalem, into a humble family, in c. 6 BO. He spent the first thirty years of his life in his home town, Nazareth, situated in northern Palestine. When Jesus was about thirty years of age he began preaching his message. He was probably familiar with the doctrines of puritanical Jewish sects like the Essenes and shared some of their beliefs. According to tradition, Jesus spent forty days in the desert during which he fasted and prayed. He then began to spread the divine message which had been revealed to him.

Jesus spoke of the dawn of a new era, which would begin with the establishment of the 'kingdom of heaven'. All evil would be banished and only truth would prevail. Peace and good would reign in the coming kingdom of heaven. The poor and the humble would be given their proper due in this kingdom. Jesus asked the people to be virtuous and keep away from everything that was bad and sinful. There was one universal god who was loving and whose worship was open to all. Everyone could seek his forgiveness. Jesus taught compassion for fellow human beings and the need

to care for the needy. His teachings directly appealed to the common people.

Jesus Christ's mission lasted for about three years. His teachings, which are summarized in what is called the Sermon on the Mount, repeatedly highlighted love and compassion, especially for the downtrodden. The poorer sections of the Jews were immediately attracted to these ideas. However, when Jesus Moved to Jerusalem he had to face the growing hostility of the Jewish elite. The Sadducees prevailed upon the Roman authorities to take action against him. The Roman province of Judaea was at this time governed by a prefect named Pontius Pilate (c. 25-36 BC). On the instructions of Pontius Pilate Jesus was brought to trial on charges of sedition and inciting the people to rebellion. He was condemned to death by crucifixion. Jesus was about thirty-three years old when he was executed.

After Jesus had been crucified the Jewish councils initiated strict action against his followers. They were probably alarmed by the popularity which the teachings of Jesus enjoyed. It should however be kept in mind that the opposition to these teachings, i.e. to Christianity, came mainly from upper class Jews and the orthodox priests. On the other hand Christianity found its earliest converts among the local Jews and the puritanical sects like the Essenes. This is not surprising when we note that the beliefs of the Essenes had a lot in common with what Jesus had taught.

In the late 1940s a large number of ancient Essene writings were discovered in caves situated near the Dead Sea. These documents have come to be known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Dead Sea Scrolls are religious texts of an Essene community which lived in the remote and inaccessible Qumran valley which is set amidst hills of the Dead Sea area of Palestine. The scrolls date back to the time of Jesus. They have revolutionized our understanding of the formative phase of Christian ideology. The Qumran community believed that the end of the world was near and that a new order would soon be established. There are references to the coming of the kingdom of heaven. It was

necessary to withdraw from the world till that time so that one was not contaminated by evil. There was the conviction that the tyranny of the Roman rulers and their local Jewish collaborators would be overthrown through divine intervention. The scrolls speak of a 'teacher of righteousness' who would lead the people into the kingdom of heaven. God would send a messiah or deliverer to show the true path. The concept of the messiah was not a new one as it was firmly rooted in ancient Jewish religious ideas. It is likely that some of the Essenes thought of Jesus as the promised messiah. We are not sure whether Jesus personally saw himself as a messiah, but later on his followers did look upon him as one. Christ, the name bestowed upon Jesus, is derived from a Greek word (*christos*) which has the same meaning as the Hebrew *mashiah* or messiah.

There are also many similarities between the teachings of Jesus and another preacher known as John the Baptist who was active at that time. John the Baptist was a popular religious leader of the Essene tradition. Instead of cutting himself off from settled society he actively propagated his ideas among the common people. He asked them to prepare for the impending end of the world by purifying themselves. Self-discipline and denial were essential to gain entry into the kingdom of heaven which would soon be established. Only the righteous would find a place in it. John the Baptist advocated ritual bathing or baptism (baptism literally means 'to dip') in the Jordan River as a form of purification. As for himself he practised extreme austerity, scarcely even eating anything. His teachings are supposed to have attracted Jesus from Nazareth to the Jordan River at the beginning of his (Jesus's) mission.

Jesus left behind a small band of disciples who dedicated themselves to spreading his message. The group was led by Simon Peter (St. Peter) who had been nominated by Jesus as his leading disciple or apostle. These disciples, who were initially based at Jerusalem, converted many Jews in Palestine to Christianity. Peter travelled to other parts of the empire, including Italy. At Rome a small Christian

community grew up around him. Peter was executed in Nero's reign. His martyrdom became a powerful religious symbol for the Christians. Peter is traditionally regarded as the first bishop of Rome and all Roman popes are considered to be his successors.

The growth of early Christianity owed much to the work of Paul (St. Paul). Paul transformed Christianity into a major religion within the Roman empire. Paul came from a Jewish family of Anatolia. He was a minor official in which capacity he had also been engaged in initiating measures against the Christians. He converted to Christianity in c AD 37. The history of Christianity underwent a radical change when Paul, who never had any direct contact with Jesus, became a Christian. Paul gave an organized shape to early Christian religion. He may be regarded as the real founder of the Church. Paul travelled throughout the Roman empire to propagate Christianity. From c. AD 45 onwards he sent missions to various provinces for popularizing Christian ideas. Paul was a well-read person and was familiar with religious trends in West Asia and the Roman empire. He knew several languages and was a prolific writer. His writings include a series of letters, known as epistles, in which he outlined the life and teachings of Jesus. The epistles of Paul comprise nearly half of the New Testament of the Bible. Paul clarified, elaborated upon and systematized what Jesus had preached. He clearly stated that Jesus Christ was the promised saviour or messiah who had been sent by God for the salvation of humankind. The kingdom of heaven had already begun with the arrival of Jesus. Paul made Christianity intelligible to non-Jewish inhabitants of the empire, thereby giving it a universal appeal. It should be remembered that initially Christianity had made use of a lot of Jewish religious terminology which was not always understood by those who were unfamiliar with it. Paul also adopted several rituals from the religions of West Asia (lighting of candles, use of holy water etc.) and made them a part of Christian practices. Paul was executed at Rome in c. 64 BC.

Initially the Romans had not been able to distinguish between Christianity and Judaism. The Christians were seen as a break-away sect of the Jews. However, whereas the mainstream Jews enjoyed some freedom to worship according to their own customs, the dissenting sects among them were not viewed favourably by the authorities. They were considered a potential source of trouble. The state therefore did not hesitate to take action against Christians and puritanical Jewish sects. In this they were sometimes assisted by Jewish groups like the Pharisees and Sadducees. Significantly, the early Christians also fell victim to any general persecution of the Jewish population by the Roman state.

It has been pointed out that one of the reasons for the suspicious attitude of the authorities towards the Christians was the popularity which the faith had among the lower classes. Further, since the Christians were monotheistic they did not worship Roman gods. They stayed away from state religion and constituted separate communities. Nero came down with a very heavy hand against the Christian community of Rome. The persecution launched by him resulted in several executions, including those of Peter and Paul. It seems that by this time a distinction was being made between the two religions. Nevertheless, the Christians must have suffered along with the Jews during the anti-Jewish campaign of Vespasian and Titus (AD 66-70).

The Christians were left more or less alone for the next half-century. In the early second century AD we hear of instructions being issued by Trajan that Christians should not be hunted out, but should only be punished if any specific charges of not worshipping Roman gods were brought against them. Relations between Christians and the Roman state deteriorated under Marcus Aurelius. Simultaneously there was tension between local Christian and non-Christian communities in some parts of the empire. There is evidence to show that there were arrests and executions of Christians in Marcus Aurelius's reign. These continued under Commodus. The situation worsened under

Septimius Severus. Septimius Severus carried out the first large-scale persecution of the Christians throughout the empire. This coincided with a campaign against the Jews. No conversions were to be allowed. Sanctions were imposed against the Christians and many were put to death or imprisoned. These policies continued to be in force almost throughout the first half of the third century AD. After a brief reversal of this policy c. AD 250, the persecution went on for another decade. Then, between c. AD 260 and 303 the Roman rulers followed a more moderate policy with regard to the Christians.

When Diocletian became emperor in 284 BC there was no significant shift in policy for the first two decades of his reign. However, shortly before he abdicated the throne he embarked upon a violent campaign to suppress Christianity. Some of the advisors of the emperor had been advocating such a line for a long time. Though he had agreed with them, he postponed the implementation of the new policy as he was preoccupied with various other problems. In AD 303 he started what is known as the Great Persecution of Christians. Diocletian wanted to reassert the traditional religious beliefs of Rome as part of his overall scheme to strengthen the state. He demanded strict adherence to official state religion. The Christians were the most prominent among those who declined to accept Roman gods and they now became the main targets of Diocletian's religious persecution. Churches and religious books were destroyed; assemblies of Christians were banned; Christian government officials were removed from their posts; and all those who professed the faith were threatened with death or imprisonment. In the eastern provinces and northern Africa, where Christianity had its main strength, the persecution was particularly severe. In all about 3000 persons are known to have been executed. Many more were arrested and tortured.

The successors of Diocletian persisted with this policy till AD 313. This date was a major turning point in the history of Christianity. In AD 313 Constantine the Great issued an edict known as the Toleration Edict (or the Edict of Milan)

which officially put an end to the persecution. The government had apparently not realized that it would encounter such stiff resistance in its attempt to suppress Christianity. In any case the religion had acquired such a large following in the empire by the end of the third century AD that it would have been virtually impossible to completely annihilate it. In West Asia and north Africa a sizeable section of the ruling class had become Christian. Carrying on with an anti-Christian policy would have created too much instability in the eastern provinces, something that Constantine was keen to avoid. During the third century AD Christianity had spread to rural areas of Egypt and north Africa. It is estimated that as much as half the population of Egypt was Christian by AD 300. Alexandria was a major centre of Christian learning and theology. The most outstanding religious scholars of Christianity belonged to the east. Early Christian literature was written in Greek or Aramaic.

The growing popularity of eastern cults, which had a substantial following even among the Roman ruling elite, eventually paved the way for the spread of Christianity in the Roman territories. This was particularly true of the eastern half of the empire in which Christianity had its roots. Constantine's Toleration Edict coincided with the permanent shifting of the seat of government of the Roman empire to the east (Constantinople) and the search for a new support base among eastern peoples with the disintegration of the Roman state in the west.

Shortly before his death (AD 337) Constantine personally converted to Christianity. He had already paved the way for making Christianity the state religion of the Roman empire. Once the new religion replaced Roman divinities, the traditional religion of Rome declined rapidly. As a state religion it grew by leaps and bounds. In the fourth century AD Christianity became the dominant religion of the Latin-speaking western provinces.

By the beginning of the third century AD the Christian Church had developed an elaborate infrastructure. Religious

assemblies of the faithful were mostly held in churches. The church was the religious and social centre around which Christian communities were organized. Church rituals were controlled more and more by priests. As priestly functions became specialized, the social distance between priests and ordinary members of the community increased. On the other hand the emphasis on charity, community service and care for the poor and the elderly sustained internal cohesion. Christians, especially in the western provinces, had come to recognize the primacy of the bishop of Rome. In c. AD 200 there were about 10,000 Christians in Rome. The figure had gone up to 40,000 by c. AD 300 and to 80,000 under Constantine. One should bear in mind that even in the fifth century AD the bulk of the Christian population resided in the east.

V

In the latter half of the third century and the early fourth century AD Christianity had to contend with another religious movement—Manichaeism. For some time Manichaeism was the main rival of Christianity in the Roman empire. Manichaeism originated in the Sassanid empire in the third century AD. It was founded by a Babylonian named Mani. Mani was born in c. AD 216. He was brought up in a Christian community and was deeply influenced by Christianity. Living in the Sassanid empire (Babylon along with most of Mesopotamia was ruled by the Sassanids) Mani had imbibed the ideas of Zoroastrianism. He also had great respect for the teachings of Buddha. Mani evolved a new religious ideology which was a combination of Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Iranian dualism. There are traces of Mithraism in his thought. The essence of Manichaeism is a dualist conception of the universe. He thought in terms of an epic struggle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. The forces of light would ultimately triumph. Meanwhile we have to be on the side of good to defeat evil. The practice of Manichaeism was based upon prescribed rituals for personal salvation and

purification. These included fasting, confessions, abstention and self-denial. Arnold Toynbee has described Manichaeism as 'Zoroastrianism in Christian dress'.

Mani first taught at Ctesiphon, the ancient Sassanid capital. Ctesiphon was situated on the Tigris, close to Babylon. He declared himself to be the founder of a new world religion. The Manichaean community, he held, would eventually embrace all humanity. For this he sent out missionaries to preach his doctrines. He created an elaborate organization with priests and monastic orders. The Manichaeans had their own churches. Mani's teachings met with an overwhelming response in Iran, Mesopotamia and Syria. He developed a close relationship with the reigning Sassanid emperor Shapur I, the son of Ardashir.

The traditional Zoroastrian priests felt threatened by the rise of Manichaeism and strongly opposed the new movement. After the death of Shapur I, the Zoroastrian priesthood reasserted itself. Kartir, who was the chief Zoroastrian priest, conducted an aggressive campaign against Mani. The Sassanid government arrested Mani and he was put to death in c. 273 BC. His followers continued to propagate his teachings and by the end of the third century AD Manichaeism was almost a world religion with churches and followers in Europe, north Africa, West Asia, Central Asia and China. However, once Zoroastrianism had become the state religion of the Sassanid empire and Christianity had been adopted by the Roman state, Manichaeism could not hope for any official patronage. The movement declined during the fourth century AD.

When Christianity became the state religion of the Roman empire it had already been in existence for three centuries. Several ideological differences had arisen in this period. Some of the controversies had caused sectarian divisions among the Christians. The first major controversy in the Christian Church was over the question of whether Jesus was human or whether he should be regarded as divine. A Christian scholar of Alexandria named Arius (died AD 336) had forcefully argued that Jesus was not divine but was essentially

human. The doctrine of Arius is called Arianism. A number of theologians held the opposite view. They emphatically stated that Jesus was not human but was God himself. He was inseparable from the supreme father. Athanasius, also of Alexandria, was the leading proponent of this conception of Jesus. This debate led to such a serious conflict that Constantine convened a council of Christian leaders to settle the matter. This council, known as the Council of Nicaea was held in AD 325. The Council of Nicaea was attended by clergymen from all over the empire and the emperor was personally present at it. Arianism was condemned by the council. Henceforth the dominant view within the Church was that Jesus was the son of God and was of the same substance as the Supreme Father. The Council of Nicaea was the first major assembly in the history of Christianity. By convening the council and referring the Arian controversy to it Constantine sought a uniform official version Christianity for the empire. In this he was largely successful.

Arianism was rejected at the official level but it did not die out. This doctrine had a large following in parts of West Asia. In western Europe Arianism witnessed a revival in the late fourth century AD when some of the Germanic tribes converted to Christianity and accepted the Arian view. Arianism became the official creed of the Visigothic kingdom of Spain. For about two centuries Arianism flourished in Spain and some other parts of western Europe. But in the sixth century AD the Visigoths became Catholics, i.e., followers of the orthodox view which had been upheld at the Council of Nicaea.

In the fifth century AD the Germanic states of western Europe accepted Christianity, mainly in its Catholic form. Western Christianity received a further boost with the conversion of the Germanic tribes, and by the time the Roman empire came to an end the Christian faith had been adopted by the overwhelming majority of Europeans. Till the rise of Islam in the seventh century AD it was also the main religion of the eastern provinces, Egypt and north Africa.

READINGS

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